INDIAN THEATRE
TRADITION, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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NEMICHANDRA JAIN



VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
576, Masjid Road, Jangpura, New Delhi 110014

ISBN 0-7069-6377-6

Typeset at PrintCraft, New Delhi-110055.
Printed at Ramprintograph, Delhi-110053.

For
Devendra and Urmi

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Preface

It is generally believed that drama and theatre like many other things are a Western gift to India. We may have had some popular entertainments like the Nautanki or the Jatra but these had little to do with drama to which we were introduced by the British through our contact with English literature, particularly Shakespeare. It is also said that the Sanskrit drama was more of dramatic poetry than drama proper, and even that had become extinct and was rediscovered for India by the western scholars. In a sense, this unfortunate impression was confirmed by the readiness with which we adopted and have been almost slavishly imitating, the western models of dramatic writing and theatrical presentation for the last two hundred years. As a result, our theatre people, until very recently, knew Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Aristotle's Poetics or even Commedia dellarte, but almost nothing of Kalidasa, Shudrak, and the *Natya Shastra*. or the Kutiattam, Yakshagana, Bhavai or Swang.

The present brief introduction to Indian theatre is an attempt to question, examine and reject this false assumption, carefully implanted and nurtured by the

colonial rulers and blindly accepted by successive generations of our westernised elite. This study aims at providing a very brief glimpse of the fascinatingly rich and varied journey of Indian theatre through thirty centuries if not more. It attempts to highlight its achievements in different phases and underlines the strands of change and continuity in its unusually long course.

Indian theatre has had a very distinct identity, with its specific aesthetics, artistic objectives and creative methods, many of which are very relevant even today. In fact, our theatre has now reached a point where it cannot make much headway without coming to terms with its own unique and unparalleled tradition, to which imaginative theatre persons even in the West are now turning. If this rather elementary exposition succeeds in arousing some curiosity and interest of our theatre practitioners and scholars in the vitality of our theatre tradition, it will have served its purpose.

This book is a revised and enlarged version of three lectures delivered by me at Sagar University at the invitation of the Madhya Pradesh Higher Education Grants Commission. I am indebted to various theatre institutions, repertory companies, and groups all over the country for generously providing the photographs of their productions, and to Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi for pictures of the traditional theatre and some other important plays.

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Chapter 1

Origin and Flowering

The distinctiveness of Indian theatre tradition in the dramatic cultures of the world—its antiquity as well as its imaginative and aesthetic quality—is more or less indisputable today. The roots of the theatre in our country are certainly very old and deep. Theatrical expression of some kind has been, since primitive and mythic ages, an integral part of Indian life. At the same time, it has undergone wide-ranging, fundamental changes during the last two to three thousand years. Broadly speaking, we can say that for a few centuries theatre formed part of the life of common people as ritualistic music and dance, story-telling and tableaus on special occasions. Subsequently, its different forms crystallised, were adopted by the upper strata of society and continued as such for more than a thousand years, some of which have come down to us as Sanskrit drama and theatre.

Our knowledge about the initial, primitive stage of theatrical activity is very meagre. However, we can safely assert that in India, as in other cultures, the theatrical activity began with primitive magical. religious or social rites, ritualistic dances, festivals etc. Even today, many tribes in different parts of the

country perform rituals related to birth, death, puberty, marriage, food gathering, hunting, battles and propitiation of their gods, goddesses and primordial forces, in which the dramatic or theatrical elements are prominent. In order to ward off an imminent danger, to ensure success in some future battle, the tribes mimic and identify with imagined situations and individuals through ritualistic dance movements, accompanied by incantations, suggestive sounds and instrumental music. We can, therefore, reasonably believe that in the distant past, different tribes and primitive communities living in this country or those coming from outside must have had similar dramatic elements in their rituals.

In the rites and ritualistic activity related to *yajnas* of the Vedic age, many situations and actions had pronounced theatrical aspects. There are frequent references in the Vedic literature to song, dance, musical instruments, decorative materials and properties, and to people connected with these activities, like the Gandharva, Suta, Shailush, Kari, Apsara, Veena player and so on. Besides, many Suktas of Rig-Veda, like Yam-Yami, Pururava-Urvashi, Vishwamitra-Nadi, Agastya-Lopamudra, Indra-Aditi etc. are in the form of dialogue, suggestive of an enactment. Later, with the ballad singing and the musical rendering of the lives of the heroes and other eminent personages of the community, or in just ordinary story-telling, most of the requirements of the early dramatic forms begin to appear. No wonder, there are references to drama, dancers, musicians and actors (Kushilava) etc. in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, of Suta and Magadha, dance and drama in the *Mahabharata*, to dramatisation of the *Ramayana* in the *Harivamsha Purana*, and about the actor and dance, drama and music in the *Bhagavata Purana*,

Markandeya Purana, and so on.

By the time we reach the historical period, we find that in the Buddhist and Jain texts monks are prohibited from watching dramatic performances, which would suggest that such performances were tempting or absorbing enough to disturb the monk's concentration. In the well-known work of Panini, the *Ashtadhyayee*, composed about the fourth century B.C., there are mentions of dramatic works and performers. A commentary on this work by Patanjali describes the conditions of the families of performers and producers. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya has references to performances, dances, music, musical instruments, and to people who made their living from theatre.

All these references from texts composed or compiled between the sixth-fifth century B.C., or even earlier, to the second-third century A.D., indicate that the theatrical tradition in this country goes back to ancient times. This activity seems to have consisted mainly of musical or dance-based enactments, simple or dramatic singing with some acting, miming of heroic sagas, ballads, legends, popular stories or just ordinary narratives. The Patanjali *Mahabhashya*, however, mentions plays, called *Kamavadha*, *Balibandhan*. Some fragments of a dramatic work of the Buddhist poet-playwright Ashvaghosha of the third century B.C., called *Sariputta Prakarana*, have also been found. The well-known treatise on dramaturgy, the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni, speaks of plays called *Devasurasangrama*, *Amritamanthana* and *Tripuradaha* in the myth related to the origin of drama.

On the basis of all these references, it can be safely asserted that some kind of theatrical activity with elements of music, dance, acting had been in vogue in

this country for at least a thousand years before the Christian era. With the appearance of more favourable socio-cultural conditions, it gradually acquired more regular and complex forms, such as those of Sanskrit drama and theatre. Thus began that fascinating period of the unique flowering and achievements of the Indian dramatic tradition.

In this new phase, plays of different kinds, styles and artistic excellence were written in Sanskrit, the language of literary expression at that time. Many innovative and often highly sophisticated styles for the presentation of those plays were also developed. This burst of energy was not confined to creative exploration—dramatic writing and staging. It also found expression in a very serious and systematic original thinking about almost all theoretical and practical aspects of the theatrical art, best exemplified by the illuminative *Natyashastra*, a comprehensive treatise or compendium on the dramatic art by Bharata Muni, unparalleled anywhere in the world.

It is a measure of the importance of drama and theatre in Indian life that the *Natyashastra* has been given the status of the Fifth Veda. This glorification of the *Natyashastra* is neither unfounded nor accidental. There is no element of the art of drama and theatre that has not been discussed here extensively, in great depth, and with insight. In fact, the *Natyashastra* is the primary and most important source of fundamental principles and ideas, not only about drama and theatre but also about other performing arts, like music and dance, as well as poetry. That is the reason, why its impact has been so far-reaching that even after about two thousand years it is still relevant and useful. Probably, it is the work not of one but many individuals, through several generations, incorporating their accumulated experience, knowledge

and ideas,

The *Natyashastra* also seems to suggest continuous and regular theatrical activity in different parts of the country during the centuries when it was compiled, because without any actual direct experience it would have been impossible even to think of all those ideas or problems so elaborately discussed in this unique work.

An estimate of the important role of the theatre in India can also be made from the myth about the origin of the theatre or *Natya* given in the *Natyashastra*. The myth mentions, among other things, that the Natyaveda was created by the great god Brahma himself who said:

> 'I have prepared this Natyaveda which will determine the good luck or bad luck, and take into account acts and ideas, of Devas as well as of the Daityas..the drama is a representation of the state of the Three Worlds. In it sometimes there is reference to duty, sometimes to games, to money, to peace; in it is found laughter, fight, love-making and sometimes killing of people... It teaches duty to those bent on duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfilment; it chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in the disciplined, energy in heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect; it gives courage to cowards, wisdom to the learned, diversion to kings, and firmness of mind to persons afflicted with sorrow, composure to persons agitated in mind... It is a mimicry of actions and conducts of people rich in various emotions, and which depicts different situations.... It will relate to actions of men good, bad and indifferent, and will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all. There is no wise maxim, no learning, no

art or craft, no device, no action that is not found in the *Natya*.'

Probably, in no theatrical culture in the world such a significant and all-pervading role has been visualised for drama and theatre. As a result, theatrical activity in this country has always been regarded as not merely a religious ritual or only a form of entertainment, but an important means and instrument for controlling and containing the distortions arising in the life of an individual or society, and to guide them into an edifying direction. Our theatre in its history of two to three thousand years has almost always had this place in society, and a refinement of the sensibility of an individual or group through the theatrical experience is an expectation which has become a part of the Indian psyche.

Apart from this theoretical speculation about drama and theatre, the image of Indian theatre tradition which emerges from the extant dramatic works in Sanskrit is no less amazing. Besides presenting the specific Indian world-view, they reveal in a picturesque manner how a human being with his distinct temperament, capacity and objective, passes through a variety of situations, with all their ups and downs, exultations and disappointments, fulfils his duties, and achieves equilibrium and harmony, a desirable goal which gives meaning to his life.

The Sanskrit dramatic works depict different mental states, emotions and ideas, desires and aspirations, strengths and weaknesses, basic moral and social questions as well as individual predicaments. They also present a many-layered, fascinating picture of the social, political, economic and cultural life of those times. Plays like *Madhyama Vyayoga*, *Urubhanga*, *Swapnavasavadatta*, *Pratima*, *Abhijnan*

Shankutala, Vikramorvashiya, Mrichchhakatika, Mudrarakshasa, Uttararumacharita, Ratnavali, Kundamala, Bhagavadejjukiya are glorious works that would bring credit to any literature. For their keen insight, delicate aesthetic sense, structural skill and variety, dramatic and theatrical quality of the language, and excellence of their poetry, they have a distinct place in world dramatic literature.

There is no intention here to attempt a detailed analysis or the evaluation of the entire Sanskrit dramatic literature or of any individual play. But it would be relevant to mention some of the elements of their content, form, and craft. Even a cursory glance at the important plays, of Bhasa to Bodhayana, from the pre-Christian era to the 7th century A.D., reveals that though the plots of most of them are from the *Puranas* or the epics like the *Ramayana, Mahabharata,* there is no dearth of plays based on historical events and personages or on imagined situations and characters. Bhasa himself, who is considered to be the earliest playwright, has written plays based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata—Pratima, Abhisheka, Madhyama Vyayoga, Urubhanga, Karnabhara*—as well as on stories from popular tales or almost imaginary events and episodes—*Swapnavasavadatta, Pratijna Yaugandharayana, Avimaraka* and others. Similarly, *Malavikagnimitra* of Kalidasa, *Mrichchhakatika* of Shudraka, *Malati-madhava* of Bhavabhooti, *Mudrarakshasa* of Vishakha-datta, are plays making extensive use of historical events and characters.

Bhasa's renderings of episodes from the *Maha-bharata* and the *Ramayana* are different from those of the later playwrights. His choice and presentation of episodes suggests that though the tradition of musical enactment of mythological stories and episodes from

the epics was still alive and strong during his time, another theatre tradition had also meanwhile emerged which led him to structure his stories in different dramatic forms and styles which were eventually mentioned as various *Roopakas* in the *Natyashastra*. In his plays, even the mythological episodes have a wider moral and human perspective. At the same time, they provide a great scope for emotional conflict, dramatic irony and intensity of dramatic action. Bhasa with his rich imagination has infused them with many motifs that make them more stageworthy and popular. In only two of his plays—*Swapnavasavadatta* and *Pratijna Yaugandharayana*, both connected with the Udayana episode—a love story is in the centre, but even that has been presented in the context of a distinct political and social well-being. This method of linking individual happiness and tragedy, success and failure, with wider social values is in keeping with the basic Indian dramatic approach.

In this respect, the Kalidasa plays are different from the Bhasa plays. All three of them are essentially love stories. In *Vikramorvashi* and *Abhijnan Shakuntala*, there is love between a man and an Apsara (divine nymph) and a man and an Apsara-born woman respectively. Here it must be mentioned that Kalidasa has given the available mythical episodes a new form and meaning according to his own creative purposes. In these plays, social and moral contexts are suggested through the irony of the situation, or through the emotional states and deep internal agony of the characters. But the human emotions in their different states are treated with such an imaginative insight and sophistication that a unique blend of poetry and theatricality is achieved. From this point of view, the plays of Kalidasa remind

one of Shakespeare's plays, though in Shakespeare the theatricality of situations is as strong as that of emotions and feelings, while in Kalidasa, the dramatic organisation of human emotions and feelings in their variety overshadows the situations.

In *Mrichchhakatika* by Shudraka, again, a love story is presented against the backdrop of social and political upheaval. Here the perspective of political anarchy, dissatisfaction and rebellion is so wide and central that often it appears that the playwright has used the Charudatta-Vasantsena episodes only to intensify that conflict and to make it more poignant. In this play, through its numerous characters and their personal relations, so many forms and levels of social life are revealed that in many ways it can be considered an important document of the socio-political life of an entire epoch.

Mudrarakshasa by Vishakhadatta is totally a play of political conflict and power and consequent clash of various power centres and their intrigues, espionage, and counter-espionage, though even these have a relevant moral purpose. The play makes it more than clear that all the political machinations and stratagems of Chanakya are motivated not for any personal aggrandisement or capture of power, but by his desire to establish a more just and competent regime.

Bhavabhooti wrote three plays. Two of these—*Mahaviracharita* and *Uttararamacharita*—are based on the Rama story; and a love tale from *Kathasarita-sagara* provides the plot of the third, *Malatimadhava*. Specially in *Uttararamacharita*, there is a very moving presentation of the conflict between the pathos created by the irony of Sita's life and the social and individual morality of the times.

Two satirical comedies (*Prahasanas*)—Mahendra Vikrama's *Mattavilasa* and Bodhayana's *Bhagava-*

dejjukiya—must be mentioned for their different kind of dramatic action and treatment of social life. They present a very fascinating picture of the degeneration of the moral values and behaviour among various religious orders of the sixth-seventh centuries. To some extent, this can also be seen in the single-actor short plays called *Bhanas*. In fact, in the Sanskrit dramatic literature, the extraordinarily imaginative rendering of mythological and other popular tales reveals many levels of human experience, social relations and individual responses.

Such a wide and sensitive presentation of life in the Sanskrit plays is not accidental. It is based on a very profound philosophical outlook, a comprehensive world-view and a highly developed aesthetics that has come down to us as the theory of the *Rasa*. The Sanskrit plays do not present a superficial, realistic reflection of life. They accomplish, with a profound moral and aesthetic discrimination, an artistic, imaginative 'imitation' (*Anukarana*) or picture of actions, feelings and various situations of human life, so that through an experience of a state of bliss, a deeper realisation of truth may be possible. The Indian view of life does not accept that a human being is a puppet in the hands of inscrutable, mysterious, blind, supernatural forces, condemned to struggle, but destined to face a pre-determined tragedy. That is why in Sanskrit plays, instead of the usual exposition of any gradually intensifying real or imaginary personal predicament or sense of sin, we have a portrayal of the joys and sufferings, success and failure, ecstasy and pathos, union and separation, laughter and tears of a person in his or her normal behaviour in various personal and social situations.

It is for this reason that Sanskrit plays, unlike Greek drama, defy categorisation into tragedy and

comedy. Instead, they are categorised according to social and mental status of the protagonists and their consequent actions. The ten kinds of plays, called *Dasha Roopaka* in the *Natyashastra*, are classified on the basis of the nature and character of the hero, the form and type of the action, not by dividing human life into the artificial and externally imposed frames like tragic and comic. The available Sanskrit plays invariably conform to this categorisation.

Naturally, in their structure also, they substantially differ from the Western drama, with a distinct kind of dramatic craft rooted in another aesthetic. Their dramatic organisation and treatment of the story material are more varied and flexible. Within the various *Roopakas*—from the *Nataka*, *Prakarana*, *Natika*, which are full of incidents and characters, to the one-act *Veethi*, *Anka* or *Bhana*—they show a variety of dramatic structures. In the Sanskrit plays, there is a pronounced emphasis on the continuity of dramatic action and a number of devices like, *Vishkambhaka*, *Praveshaka*, *Choolika*, are used, to bring out the nuances of the story, apart from the various characters themselves speaking about past events and incidents in different ways at different times. This flexibility often facilitates the incorporation of a number of main or secondary story elements, treated simultaneously and sustained without any mix-up.

Since the Sanskrit plays regard drama as drama or make-believe, and not reality, their treatment of Time and Space is imaginative and not realistic or conditioned by the so-called unities of time and place. To indicate the change of time and locale, sometimes a character mentions the change, or it is communicated by the conventions of the movement of the actors from one stage area to another. For this reason, and

because of the Sanskrit drama being basically acting or actor-oriented, there is no need for realistic or any other kind of scene-setting. Frequently, some character himself creates a living, sensuous picture of the place and surroundings by his detailed poetic description before the spectators. That is why only a very few dramatic properties have been mentioned in the Sanskrit texts, and those too for a theatrical use or miming.

This freedom has enabled the Sanskrit dramatist to incorporate in his dramatic action, natural and supernatural events, human and super-human characters, animals, birds, and other animals, even trees or inanimate objects. The inherent possibility of presenting different layers of reality in its totality gives to the craft of the Sanskrit drama an unparalleled power and inclusiveness.

Another distinguishing feature of Sanskrit plays is a many-level organisation of communication between the characters. The Sanskrit plays use prose, recitation, verses and songs, thus giving great flexibility to the dramatic speech and an incredible variety and complexity of expression, from just narrativeness to many layers and shades of human emotion. This is very important for the actor, because this variety in the speech gives him an opportunity to make his verbal communication more interesting and effective. Besides, to make the speech lively, natural and appropriate to the characters, the Sanskrit plays use standard Sanskrit as well as different Prakrits or dialects. This makes the characters more credible, it becomes easier for the spectators to identify with them, apart from making the speech attractive by the varying verbal music of the dialects.

For communicating some abstract, indirect or mental aspects of the dramatic action on the stage,

the Sanskrit plays resort to a number of inventive devices. There is, of course, the *swagata* or aside in which a character expresses his reaction or feeling when alone or in the presence of others, which is similar to such devices in the western drama. But the Sanskrit drama has two other devices called *janantika* and *apavarita*, in which two characters exchange ideas or reactions which are not intended for others, or to say something which is heard by all the other characters except the one who is being referred to. Of course, all these expressions are heard by the audience. Similarly, the Sanskrit plays have announcements or conversation from the *nepathya* or backstage, besides the *akashavani* through which super-natural characters communicate. All these devices, while maintaining an uninterrupted flow of dramatic action, create a kind of audio-visual attractiveness. They all have a fascinating and imaginative blend of naturalness and stylisation, in other words, of theatricality.

In fact, the Sanskrit dramatic structure is finely tuned to either of the two production styles—the codified or stylised or the representational technique, called the *natyadharmi*, as well as the comparatively more flexible, popular method, called the *lokadharmi*. Some of the stories in the plays have a dramatic action in which an external conflict and physical movements are more important, while in others the inner psychological life; some have a predominance of the hard, accentuated or frightening mental states, while others of softer, delicate and pleasant feelings. Some require emphasis on verbal expression, while the others need more of music and dance. The style of the Sanskrit drama is determined by these differences, which facilitates the work of the director and the performer.

After these general observations about the structural or stylistic methods of the Sanskrit drama, it would now be appropriate to turn to the Sanskrit theatre. Here, it is necessary to state that, except for Kutiyattam in Kerala, no tradition of staging Sanskrit plays is extant in the country. Even in Kutiyattam, there is much greater emphasis on a detailed explanation and comments on Sanskrit speeches or verses in Malayalam by the *vidushaka* or the jester, rather than on the Sanskrit text itself. Accordingly, elaboration of one act, scene or an episode of a play, or even one line or verse, continues for hours, sometimes even days together, by various devices of miming and acting. Undoubtedly, Kudiyattam reveals many conventions, devices and methods of the Sanskrit stage presentation. Even so, it is at best one of the styles of the *dakshinatya* or the Southern approach to performance, and it would not be correct to consider it as the only or main representative style of the Sanskrit theatre.

Unfortunately, no other accounts of actual presentation of the Sanskrit plays are available. Under these circumstances, whatever we know or say about the Sanskrit theatre is based mostly on Bharata's *Natyashastra* and some later commentaries on that work, or, to an extent, on the structure of the available plays and the internal evidence of their stage directions. Lately, there has also been an attempt to determine the staging methods in the Sanskrit theatre from the traditional theatrical styles in different regions. Many directors have tried to recreate the Sanskrit plays on the stage by various methods. But, on the whole, this entire exercise is still in its initial stages, and it would not be very proper to come to any definite conclusion on its basis.

In spite of these limitations, a few observations can

be made on the subject. The Sanskrit theatre, despite an integral importance of the dramatic script, is acting-oriented, in which there is great emphasis on the talent, creative imagination and technical skill of the performer. This is borne out by the structure of the plays as well as the detailed and intricate analysis of various aspects of acting in the *Natyashastra*. In this context, the wide connotation of acting or *abhinaya* as elaborated in the *Natyashastra* is as notable as it is different from the western concept of acting.

The objective of *abhinaya*, according to the Sanskrit dramaturgy, is to create a feeling of bliss or *Ananda* in the mind of the spectators by revealing various mental states of a character. In actual life, various basic human emotions, like love, pity, fear, anger, produce different mental states. But in a play, when the actors show the characters passing through various sentiments and their clash, the spectators experience them in a manner that in the end a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment or *Ananda* is produced. The aim of *abhinaya* in the Sanskrit theatre is to create the *Rasa* or *Ananda*. This concept of acting is completely different from the Greek or the Aristotelian concept of catharsis, according to which an intense experience of emotions like terror, fear and pity in tragic plays leads to a catharsis, or purges human beings of these emotions.

For creating *Rasa* or *Ananda*, the performer in a Sanskrit play shows various sentiments and emotional states of the character through his movements of eyes, lips and other organs, besides words and sounds. Instead of being submerged in any emotion, he attempts by his multi-dimensional, complex expressions to enable the spectators to experience them. That is the reason why in the Sanskrit acting, so much importance is accorded to the main and

supplementary, changing mental states, as well as the physical manifestations connected with these states of the character or *patra*, i.e., the receptacle of emotions, as he is called in the Sanskrit dramaturgy. The main objective of the Sanskrit *abhinaya* is to concretise and physicalise various basic emotions and consequent mental reactions.

The Sanskrit theatre emphasises the use of all the faculties or the total personality of an actor. In the *angika abhinaya* or physical acting, not only are all parts of the body regarded as a means of expression, but different meanings are ascribed to their movements, particularly the gestures or formations of hands, fingers, the movement of the eyes and various poses and postures of the body, separately as well as in conjunction. This ultimately leads to almost an entire language of gestures. The movements of the feet, for example, range from the very simple, ordinary walking to the intricate and complex dance movements. In the Sanskrit *Abhinaya*, there is an insistence on acting through the entire body, or total acting, and it is necessary for an actor to be proficient in dance.

Similarly, for the *vachika abhinaya* or acting through words, not only a simple knowledge of the Sanskrit language as well as of the Prakritas or the regional dialects, but also a deeper understanding of their metres, rhythms and poetry is necessary. In addition, proficiency in music or singing is indispensable. In a Sanskrit performance, singing is incorporated in a carefully designed manner in various forms and at various levels.

But in a performance, often, even before the physical movements and voice of the actor, his appearance and costumes create an impact on the spectators and give them an impression of the personality of the character. That is the reason why in

the Sanskrit theatre, keeping in view the total personality of the actor, his costumes, make-up and even the properties required by him on the stage, have been included as the *aharya abhinaya* in the art of acting.

Various objects, activities and changes in the natural world—hills, rivers, trees, birds and animals, morning, evening and night, or sky, moon, sun, stars and even heaven, hell or the earth—are all sought to be expressed through *abhinaya*, and a gesture language for suggesting these has been developed. In fact, there is no external activity or internal experience in life for which appropriate expression or technique is not available to the actor on the Sanskrit stage.

This has been possible because, in the Sanskrit acting tradition, there is no attempt to simulate reality or to look real, but to show or suggest reality. The Sanskrit theatre considers stage presentation not an imitation of reality, but its recreation with a special objective, in which the external and the internal, the visible and the invisible, the expressed and the inherent, the direct and the indirect, the sensuous and the abstract, the worldly and the supernatural—all the levels and forms are included. For this purpose, all possible methods and techniques can be used, including the *natyadharmi*, i.e., 'the totally classical, or stylised, and the *lokadharmi*, i.e., those based on natural or popular expressions or usages. But even in the popular techniques there is an attempt not to imitate the real, but to make use of direct, spontaneous and concrete physical movements or vocal expressions in place of the codified, classical gestures etc. For this purpose, the actor is free to draw upon styles and techniques prevalent in different regions in the country.

The Sanskrit performance begins with the *poorva-*

ranga or the preliminaries. The *poorvaranga* is, on the one hand, an initial religious ritual for propitiating the gods, in order to protect the performance from all kinds of disturbances, to create an atmosphere suitable to the dignity and importance of the theatrical creation, and to indicate to the actors to be fully ready to enter into an appropriate mental state for the performance. On the other hand, the *poorvaranga* also induces the spectators to watch with greater concentration. The instrumental music and dance of the *poorvaranga* are attractive and imaginative devices for riveting the spectators' attention to the performance.

On another level, the characters like the *sutradhara* or the director and the *vidushaka* or the jester also contribute to involving the spectators in the action of the performance. Ordinarily, in a Sanskrit play, the *sutradhara* comes only in the beginning and leaves after introducing the play, the playwright and the objective of the presentation, and does not appear again till about the end of the performance. But even in this very brief appearance, he underlines the fact that the performance is meant for the spectators, specially the initiated, that is the sensitive and knowledgeable spectators called the *sahridayas*. On account of this constant reference and relatedness to the spectators, the Sanskrit dramatic presentation can never become a mere religious ritual or an illusion of reality.

The *vidushaka* relates the performance to the spectators in yet another manner. It is a basic premise of the Sanskrt dramaturgy that a dramatic presentation is primarily a means of experiencing the *Rasa* or bliss. Only through pleasing the spectators can it do anything else, specially the edification or enlightenment of the audience. That is one reason why humour and its main source the *vidushaka* have

been given an important place in the Sanskrit drama. In the performance, the *vidushaka* carries out in many ways, his responsibilities of furthering the dramatic action, of satire or comment, or of amusement of the spectators by his mere presence.

Some of the features of a Sanskrit dramatic performance have been indicated in our discussion about drama, as for instance, the convention of *kakshyavibhaga* or the imaginary division of the stage into different areas, by which various locales can be suggested without any scenic change. Here a few other usages can be mentioned. One is the use of the *rangapati* or a small curtain carried by stage-hands to indicate or to facilitate the entry of the characters 'entering seated'. In fact, this indicates the appearance or revelation of the characters in some particular pose or state from behind the hand-held curtain. On the Sanskrit stage, the exit and entrance of a character do not mean the same thing as in a proscenium theatre or generally on the western stage. This curtain or *rangapati* is used in a Sanskrit dramatic performance in many ways—for making the revelation or the appearance of the characters on the stage more attractive, interesting or dramatic, for indicating their importance, for heightening suspense, and to stimulate the attention of the spectators.

On the whole, an analysis of a Sanskrit performance reveals a flexible theatrical style which emphasises the capacity and skill of a performer to create a magical world, and not an external spectacle. Such recognition of the power of the art of acting is, probably, not found in any other theatrical culture. The Sanskrit dramatic tradition indicates a significant achievement of man's creative endeavors.

But this theatre, established on such a strong base of theory and practice, had disintegrated gradually by

the 10th century A.D. Subsequently, a few Sanskrit plays were certainly written and occasionally also performed in princely courts, but they were mainly literary exercises, with little relation to dramatic performance or genuine theatre. There are many reasons for this decline—social and political instability created by foreign invasion and internal conflicts, loss of creative energy in the Sanskrit language gradually confined to a small elite, fall in the standard of dramatic writing due to lack of talent, and loss of appeal for common spectators etc., etc.

For the next one thousand years, the theatrical activity took place not in Sanskrit but in different regional languages, which, like Tamil, Kannada and other languages of the South, were already vehicles of creative expression; or those which were emerging out of the Prakritas and the Apabhransha and acquiring their own specific character. Not that theatrical work in Sanskrit ended altogether. Theatrical performances entirely in Sanskrit, based on Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda*, or in mixed Sanskrit and regional languages, like the Kutiyattam, continued in different parts of the country. But one, their number was from the beginning very small, and secondly, later even this gradually stopped, and in every region almost the entire theatrical activity was confined to the regional language only, which continues even today.

But, in spite of this change in the language, the relation of this new activity with the Sanskrit drama and theatre was not entirely snapped. It was a kind of transformation or new extension in the changed conditions. Particularly, through the *Natyashastra* and its various conventions, usages and methods, the new theatrical practice remained related to the Sanskrit theatre. In fact, in the theatres or the *natyas* of different languages, a fusion of many regional traditions

with the Sanskrit tradition took place. Some of these had come to the Sanskrit theatre itself, in the beginning, from different regions, and had been incorporated into the Sanskrit dramatic forms and their production styles. Thus, the new theatrical work, now in different regional languages, indicated yet another stage of the Indian dramatic tradition, in which along with a wider continuity of the Indian dramatic art, the continuity of the Sanskrit theatre was also implied.

In this dialectic of continuity and change the new undoubtedly was predominant. The central place and domination of the Sanskrit language had ended and various regional languages, and their distinct social, cultural, literary, specially the theatrical, practices, trends and methods were acquiring importance. Now for the first time, in the field of theatrical activity, along with the unity, the cultural diversity and richness of the country were also finding full expression.

Chapter 2

The Medieval Tradition and Its Extension

After this brief survey of the rise and development of the Indian theatre tradition, an attempt can now be made to understand the character of the next stage of theatrical activity. But before doing that, it would be worthwhile to dwell briefly on one important point.

This phase of the Indian theatre is spread over a period of about one thousand years, and many of its strands and forms have continued upto the present day. The activity in this entire phase is often called 'folk theatre' today, because, unlike the town-based classical Sanskrit theatre, it has flourished in the countryside. This nomenclature is misleading for a number of reasons. During this long and extended phase of our theatrical pursuit, many of the dramatic modes and styles, developed in different regions and languages, have innumerable elements of our classical arts. It is, therefore, improper to call them folk theatre, mainly in imitation and due to the influence of the western historians, sociologists and other academics etc., only because they have been preserved and developed in our rural communities.

A large number of them are not spontaneous or simple like the songs, dances, or pictorial representations of any tribal, agricultural or rural community. The structures and techniques of many of these theatrical expressions are complex, and for any proficiency in them a prolonged training and practice is indispensable, besides some proficiency in music and dance and knowledge of the Puranas, epics and poetry. The miming and acting in the Kutiyattam or the Kuchipudi, dancing in the Yakshagana, or singing and drumming in Swang or the Nautanki, cannot be acquired without considerable training. For any excellence in them, it is necessary to learn from a Guru or a teacher almost, if not totally, like other classical arts of the country. That is why many serious scholars and practitioners of these theatrical modes or *natyas*, keeping their special characteristics in mind, have increasingly come to call them 'traditional' rather than 'folk' theatre. This new description also is a little wide and, therefore, inadequate to some extent. But compared to the 'folk', the 'traditional' is nearer the distinct characteristics of these theatrical modes, and at the same time separates them from both the classical Sanskrit as well as the modern theatre.

It is also necessary to repeat here that though all these theatrical modes of different regions and languages are being examined under the common category of traditional theatre, on account of some shared characteristics, they have tremendous diversity and variety of approach and methods. Thus, though they have many elements of the Sanskrit theatre tradition, these have inevitably been changed or transformed and assimilated according to the distinct geographical, historical, social and cultural conditions of each region.

In fact, it can be said with reasonable certainty that even at the time when the Sanskrit theatre was at its zenith, different regions of the country had their own local performance styles and structures, nearer to the life of the common people which were important means of their entertainment. Such a view is not mere guess work. The *Natyashastra* itself speaks of four broad styles or manners of theatre specified according to the regions of north, south, east and west. Many other works on dramaturgy mention the *Uparoopakas* or minor dramatic modes which are, more or less definitely, indicative of regional theatres.

It can, therefore, be surmised that with the growing inactivity of the Sanskrit theatre and consequent decline in interest and patronage, most of the theatre people—producers, actors, teachers and other experts—gradually left those centres and, returning to their own or other regions, involved themselves in the popular theatrical activity there. Thus the sophisticated methods and usages of the Sanskrit theatre must have been incorporated into the simple but more vital performance styles popular or prevalent among the common people. Actually, this process of fusion or mutual give-and-take operated on many levels—between the classical and the popular, the multi-regional and the local, the everlasting and the immediate, the religious and the secular, the written and the oral. This fusion or mutual exchange took place between all modes of expression, including the literary, performing and graphic arts, and they were all influenced and enriched in the process.

Among the performing arts, besides the context of the Sanskrit plays and their staging methods, such give-and-take occurred between the ballad-singing of the wandering minstrels, the Harikatha and the Kirtana or singing of the devotional stories, and the

ritualistic and other forms of music and dance. Thus, dramatic modes or *natyas* with different flavour and structures, in keeping with the specific social and cultural tendencies of various regions, came into existence and developed. This process continued in different regions from the 10th-11th centuries right upto the 19th century. This is true as much of the complex, semi-classical and Sanskrit-Malayalam mixed dramatic mode, Kutiyattam of Kerala, of the 9th and 10th centuries, as of Kashmir's popular theatre, Bhand Pathra of the 16th-17th centuries.

Thus began the medieval phase of the Indian theatre, not only fascinating in itself, but also somewhat unusual in the history of world theatre. Though it is often called a period of decay or decline in comparison with the Sanskrit drama and theatre, this estimate is based on very narrow and one-sided criteria. In actual fact, the theatre of this phase, besides being in many ways very imaginative and vital, is closely related to the life of the people which is its great strength. But before commenting further on this aspect, it is necessary to identify some of the major characteristics of this theatrical activity.

The most important feature noticed in this phase is the change in the importance and nature of the written dramatic text. It may probably be more appropriate to say that drama as a creative work in itself has almost ceased to exist in the regional theatres of medieval times. In the Sanskrit theatre, the dramatist and his work had a central place and importance. Indeed, without the great dramatic works of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta, Bhavabhuti, Shriharsha, Bodhayana and others, it is impossible to think of the Sanskrit theatre or its distinctive character.

But, in the subsequent phase, not a single playwright

emerged in any of the regional languages, whose work could be considered drama according to any definition, or which in its creative quality and level was significant or mentionable like the Sanskrit plays. The Sanskrit dramatic writing, besides being an important element of a theatrical creation, also provided aesthetic pleasure or literary experience like any independent creative work of excellence. But the *natyas* of the regional languages in the medieval period are based not on any dramatic works, but on scripts prepared with the material from different epics, legends, poems, songs, and other sources. The plays written in this period tend to be more or less theatre texts or production scripts, full of poetry, song, providing for music and dance. Whatever be their relevance or excellence for performance, their significance and value as independent creative works is very little.

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether music and dance predominated in these *natyas* because good or competent dramatic writing was not available, or because of the predominance of music and dance no play comparable to the Sanskrit drama was written in this long period of about one thousand years. This question needs a deeper probing and wider investigation. But the argument that this happened because no talented poet or creative writer emerged during this period is not valid at all. Actually, this phase is marked by the presence of some of the greatest poets in almost all Indian languages, whose work has also been used in the theatrical activity of this period. This fact seems to lead to the conclusion, that if all these poets were familiar with and sometimes even involved in the theatre and its requirements, and yet they did not write any significant plays, it must be due to some other deeper reasons.

Similarly, the argument that in this period, the modern Indian languages were still in their infancy and not developed enough to be effectively used for a complex and inclusive medium like the drama is also only partially true. This phase is, as mentioned earlier, marked by excellent poetry unequalled in its power and subtlety. Secondly, the South Indian languages, like Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, are very old, in which creative literary work had been going on for centuries almost parallel to the Sanskrit literature. But even in these languages, there is no mentionable dramatic writing. The plays like *Ashcharyachudamani, Subhadradhananjaya* or *Tapatisamwarana,* written in Sanskrit for Kutiyattam, are mere echoes or summaries of other Sanskrit plays and do not have high place as independent literary works of excellence. Thirdly, the creative literary talent does not always wait for a prior development of the language. Instead, it often plays an important role in making a language powerful and expressive as never before. Shakespeare is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. In Hindi, the name of Bharatendu Harishchandra can be mentioned, who by his plays, while creating and forging a new dramatic language, also gave unprecedented creative power to the modern Khadiboli Hindi.

It seems, therefore, that the theatre of this phase began, for more than one reason, with an overwhelming emphasis on music and dance which not only continued but, with time, became more pronounced. As a result, the written word could not acquire sufficient importance for the dramatic writing to be considered indispensable for theatrical work. This situation persisted for about eight to nine centuries. During the 14th to 17th centuries, the Bhakti Movement or the upsurge of the devotional fervour, produced great poets in many regions and languages,

but even that did not lead to any plays of creative excellence.

Indeed, the saints as well as the poets of the Bhakti Movement found the theatre based on song and dance more suitable for their objectives. Their efforts gave a new dynamism, thrust and relevance to theatrical activity all over the country, and it became a powerful medium for the dissemination and nurturing of the devotional attitude. In this process, many new *natyas* or theatrical modes emerged, developed and achieved significant successes. Naturally, only this kind of theatrical activity could remain acceptable and meaningful in the prevalent atmosphere, which, in spite of many ups and downs, continued to be popular till the middle of the 19th century.

As mentioned before, this theatrical activity was marked by a strong tendency to stage, with the help of music, dance, miming etc., the poems, narratives and songs available in the specific region and language. The tradition of musical narration or dramatic singing of popular tales, interspersed with dance or dance-like movements, by itinerant bards and performers, such as the Charanas etc., has been very widespread and popular all over the country since ancient times. The singing of episodes from very popular legends and tales, from epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, or Puranas like the *Bhagavata* and *Harivamsha*, was particularly cherished. Similarly, the heroic deeds of the kings, warriors and other great men of the region were also recited. Many languages have their own versions of the epics and other narrative poems. Besides these, one more Sanskrit poem which has widely and deeply influenced the content of the traditional theatre along with the music and dance of that period, is the *Geeta Govinda* written

by poet Jayadeva in the 12th century. Most of the performance scripts of the regional *natyas* till the 16th-17th centuries are based on such materials.

The theatrical activity of this phase in almost all regions is different from the Sanskrit theatre in yet another important aspect. The Sanskrit drama, in spite of a few religious or ritualistic elements, is basically secular in its approach, content and presentation. The plots of the Sanskrit plays are not based, directly or indirectly, on religious feelings, objectives or episodes. They mostly deal with the everyday life, even if that life is related to divine or mythological characters, events and episodes, or has some religious observances as part of the daily normal routine of the characters. Even the Sanskrit plays inspired by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do not generally treat Rama and Krishna as incarnation of God, but as great personages with extraordinary qualities and powers. In quite a few plays, the emerging image of religious sects and priests is not complimentary or flattering but satirical.

In contrast, the subsequent medieval theatre was religious almost from the beginning, or got related soon to one or the other religious establishment and its rituals and occasions. Many of the theatrical modes emerged and developed in the temples, where they eventually became part of the regular or occasional, normal or special, religious rituals performed in the *Natya Mandapas*. Certainly, the picture of the theatrical activity during the 10th to 13th-14th centuries, is not very clear or definite. But the various kinds of performances inspired by Jayadeva's poem the *Geeta Govinda*, in spite of its strong erotic undercurrent, only confirm the growing religiosity.

During the 15th to 17th centuries, the Bhakti

Movement inspired a number of new theatrical modes or renovated the existing ones. These were all not only a part of the general religious movement, but were also organised for a wider dissemination and popularity of the objectives of some specific religion or religious sect. The Ankianat of Assam, Bhagavatamela of Tamilnadu, Krishnattam of Kerala, Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh, Dashavatar of Maharashtra, Rasleela and Ramleela of Uttar Pradesh are very clearly like Vaishnava religious rituals, in which frequently the performers are regarded not as ordinary human beings, but '*Swaroopas*' or incarnations of God and are worshipped as such during the performance.

This religious orientation is clear also from their performance scripts, like *Rukminiharan, Parijataharan, Kaliadaman, Shriramavijaya* in the Ankianat or Bhaona; *Jagannathvallabha* in the Jatra; *Bhamakalapam* in the Kuchipudi; *Radhamadhava, Gajenderamoksha, Janakiparinaya, Parashuramavijaya* in the Bhagavatamela, which are all related to episodes which have a distinct religious flavour. This is very eloquently evident in the theatrical modes, the Rasleela and Ramleela of Uttar Pradesh, which are based on creative work of great poets like Soordas and Tulsidas, deeply submerged in the religious, devotional attitude of the authors. By the end of the 17th century, when the Vaishnava Bhakti Movement started losing some of its fervour, the Shaiva or Shakta influence also appears in many dramatic forms, specially the Jatra, in stories like *Chandimangal, Mahishasuramardini, Haraparvati*, etc.

In fact, the Bhakti Movement was so inclusive and sweeping, and so widely connected with the deep and fundamental concerns of the Indian social life, that even after its decline, most theatrical modes either continued to present episodes showing various facets

of the incarnation of Rama and Krishna directly, or became vehicles for conveying religious feelings or devotion-inspiring beliefs in some manner or the other.

There are many reasons for this shift from the secular life to religious sentiment. But one thing is obvious. During the period of the rise and flowering of the Sanskrit drama and theatre, that is before the 10th century A.D., religion or religious ritual and action, though an important element in the life of the individual and society, was not the only or the most crucial activity of life, nor did the decisive recognition or identity of the individual and community or their existence depend upon it. But during the middle ages, the assertion of religious identity took the form of a struggle for the very survival as distinct people or society. The conflict and antagonism with the Muslim conquerors and rulers mainly centered around religion and the co-existence of the people with them could be really possible only on the basis of acceptance of an independent, distinct identity at the religious level. Thus, during this period, it was mainly through the religious movements, that an exchange, mutual adjustment, synthesis or harmony between the indigenous and outside ideologies, social ideals and beliefs became possible. In such a situation it was natural that religion became the axis of Indian life and its expression became inevitable not only in theatre but also other creative arts like poetry, music, dance etc.

As the political, social and individual life became more stable and normal, and the urgency, intensity or sharpness of the struggle for religious identity gradually weakened, many of the theatrical expressions began to lose their purely and strictly religious, sectarian character and became more and more

cultural. The Jatra of Bengal, Terukuttu of Tamilnadu, Veethinatakam of Andhra Pradesh, or, to some extent, the Yakshagana of Karnataka are the examples of this process. They started presenting, besides the religious stories, some historical, social and political themes, or the mythological episodes were presented in a manner that their religious aspect was no more predominant.

At the same time, many other dramatic modes also emerged which are basically and mainly non-religious and whose themes and contents are widely social and political, like the Tamasha, Bhavai, Mach, Khyal, Sang, Swang, Nautanki, Naqal, Bhand Pathra, Karyala and others. These, while staging stories of Satya Harish Chandra, Nala Damayanti, Prahlad, or other episodes from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, also started presenting historical or social events, folk tales or medieval romances. By the 19th century, some political themes also became popular. Plays like *Mitharni*, *Patthe Bapurao* in the Tamasha, *Jasma Odan* and *Jhenda Jhulan* in the Bhavai, *Raja Bharthari* and *Devar-Bhaujai* in the Mach, *Dhola Maru* and *Shirin Farhad* in the Khyal, *Amar Singh Rathor* and *Sultana Daku* in the Nautanki or Swang, *Shahi Lakadhara* in the Sang, or the satirical presentation of a monk, a money-lender or a government official in the Karyala—they all indicate the growing variety of themes in the traditional theatre.

But more important than the selection of stories or episodes is the meaning and structure given to them. Broadly, two levels of treatment can be seen here. In the mainly devotional *natyas*, like the Rasleela, Ankia Nat or Ramleela, there is usually some intensity of feeling, as the poetry used in them is generally powerful and moving. To some extent, they suffer from a kind of monotony, but they are not superficial

or contrived. Their purpose is to kindle or strengthen a strong and undiluted devotional fervour.

In most other *natyas*, however, there is an emphasis only on two or three main sentiments or situations—love, valor and humour. Of course, pathos also appears at many points in the context of love and conflict, but usually it tends to be exaggerated and borders on the sentimental. This situation obtains in almost all stories and episodes whether they are mythological, historical, based on folk tales and legends, or are social or political in character. These performances certainly entertained the common audiences because of their broad and often crude treatment, and, to an extent, also became a vehicle for communicating the idealism and traditional values of Indian society. But they do not leave any deep or sensitive emotional impact which is expected from a significant artistic experience.

The aesthetic that governs them is, like the Sanskrit drama, based on the *Rasa*. Also, these *natyas* instead of emphasizing conflict, tend to transport the spectator to a state of equilibrium after passing through many ups and downs of life and various states of inter-relationship of the individual and the collective. But the treatment of these situations or states, and of the characters going through them, is more or less one-dimensional or superficial and crude. One of the main reasons for this inadequacy is that these scripts are merely a collection of different elements from various sources for the purpose of performance, or are written to meet its various requirements. There is no independent creative urge or desire for innovation behind them, without which no play, indeed no creative work, can acquire any deep and lasting relevance or significance.

This is even more clearly evident from the Parsi-

style plays written in the Hindi-speaking region during the 19th and 20th centuries, which, in spite of their great success and popularity on stage, have failed to become significant as dramatic literature. It is also true of almost all the plays, inspired by the western theatre, written in various other languages of this country during the last one hundred fifty years and more. By acting in them, many performers have become famous and their performances memorable, but nobody wants to read those plays today. We will come to these aspects of the drama and theatre in the modern period a little later. Here this fact has been mentioned only to indicate that the scripts of the medieval theatre, in spite of their effective and attractive presentation, are not in themselves considerable for any creative excellence.

It may be stressed here that these theatre scripts have only a general framework of a story or an episode, on the basis of which the actor improvises speech in the performance, furthers the story, or comments on the dramatic action. In a way, it is the actor who provides flesh and blood to this skeleton and gives it vitality and meaning. The absence of the creative playwright also makes the traditional theatre, more than even the Sanskrit theatre, so completely the theatre of the actor.

One or two other characteristics of the traditional plays or scripts deserve to be noted. In many *natyas*, the script has two parts after the initial invocation. The first is like an introduction in which, usually, there is a predominance of song, music and dance, such as the *Nitya Ras* in the Rasleela, *Gana-Gaulan* in the Tamasha, *Oddalga* in the Yakshagana, the monk episode in the Karyala, the *Vesha* or playlet of the Brahmin in the Bhavai, and so on and so forth.

The second part has the main play or plays.

Interestingly, in most of these modes, the performance consists of not one but many small playlets, called the *Vesha* in Bhavai, *Vaga* in the Tamasha, *Leela* in the Rasleela, *Prasanga* in the Yakshagana, *Swang* in the Karyala. This means that the performance is not confined to a single story, but presents many stories with different situations, sentiments and mental states. One reason for presenting more than one story in a single performance can be that, in the absence of a well-organised structure, a single episode cannot be sustained for a very long time, only on the strength of the improvisations of the performer. In order to keep the spectators interested in the entire performance, which has to run for a whole night, a variety of situations and characters is very necessary. For the same reason, probably, in the *natyas* like the Jatra or the Nautanki, in which the dramatic scripts have a more organised structure and cover a wider area, a single story continues for a whole night.

In fact, the traditional theatre so predominantly centers round a performance that any discussion of drama or dramatic script in its context often tends to be futile or, at least, incomplete. In order to understand, therefore, the real power and source of continued popularity of these *natyas*, it is necessary to explore their presentation and performance.

In the production or presentation of the traditional theatre, the process of continuity and change in the methods, usages and conventions of the Sanskrit theatre is quite evident, confirming that the arts in India, in spite of their often very rigid codifications, have an astonishing flexibility as well as a built-in capacity of adaptation and renovation. For instance, take the element like the *poorvaranga*, which has been very elaborately discussed and prescribed in the *Nayashastra*. In almost all the regional *natyas*, one

or the other aspect of the *poorvaranga*, or something similar to it, is invariably there. Its most elaborate and prolonged pattern is seen in the Kutiyattam where the *poorvaranga* itself continues, sometimes, for two or three nights. In the Ankia Nat of Assam, the Nata Sankeertana of Manipur, the Yakshagana of Karnataka, also, there is a great elaboration of practices similar to the *poorvaranga*.

Almost all the *natyas* have the *mangalacharana* or invocation in which Ganesh or some other god or goddess is propitiated. In some modes, the act of placing the *Jarjara* or Indra's Staff on the stage, thus ensuring its sacredness, is carried out in some manner or the other. For instance, in the Mach of Malwa, a sweeper and a water-carrier appear on the stage to suggest its cleaning and consecrating. In some others, solo or group dances are performed in the beginning, while the use of instrumental music, particularly by some percussion instrument like the Nakkara, Mridang, Maddal, Dholak, before the regular performance begins, is found in almost all of them. Thus, the conventions of invoking some god for the success of the performance, consecration of the stage, and preparing the mind of the performers and the spectators for the performance, similar to the *poorvaranga*, are an intrinsic part of the traditional theatre.

The *kakshavibhaga* or the imaginary division of the stage for different purposes, which is an important convention of the Sanskrit theatre, is also observed in almost all the *natyas*, though in a somewhat flexible manner. The change of locale is mostly indicated by the performers by a linear or circular movement on the stage, though the stage divisions are not observed as strictly as indicated in the *Natyashastra*. Often, the performers themselves mention the change of

place in their speeches. Similarly, the change of time is indicated either by song and dance or declared by the performers. In such an imaginative treatment of time and place, which spontaneously incorporates the entire universe and all dimensions of time, the past, present and future, the question of the so-called 'unities' just does not arise. This is one of the major strengths of these theatrical expressions.

But the most important distinctive feature of the medieval *natyas* is the predominance in them of music and dance and their many-sided uses. The Sanskrit theatre also had music and dance, but it used them only according to the requirements of situation and style, in a prescribed and restrained manner. In the Sanskrit drama, the speeches in prose, with verses meant for recitation or singing, have the central place. But in the subsequent medieval *natyas*, the prose dialogue is either absent or secondary. The main story is rendered through song, narrative singing or by miming and dramatic dances. In fact, the music and dance form the very body of the traditional performances, their main vehicles of communication and source of popularity, the crucial elements of their distinct style and theatre culture.

There are sufficient reasons to believe that the theatrical methods and practices which developed in different regions and languages of this country between the 10th and 15th centuries, were based on the theatre modes with music and dance, called the *Uparoopakas*, already prevalent in some variation or the other in those regions. The *Sangeetakas* or the plays produced in a musical idiom seem to have become more popular in the last phase of the Sanskrit theatre itself. As a matter of fact, by the time of Bhavabhuti or Shriharsha, the Sanskrit language had moved away from the people and the themes of

Sanskrit dramas had lost their appeal for the common spectator. They lack variety as well as the creative energy of the earlier phase and suffer from repetitiveness and decline in their artistic level. This situation seems to have led to an increasing use of music and dance, in order to ensure the continued interest of the spectators. Thus, when the theatrical activity shifted from the Sanskrit to the regional languages, the local theatrical expressions with music and dance acquired, naturally, greater importance and priority.

But music and dance serve many purposes in these modes and are used in various ways. Their place in different *natyas* is determined by their specific ingredients and requirements. In almost all of them, the elaboration of action and communication between the characters takes place through musical speech instead of every-day language. Thus music is the chief means of communicating the story and comment on the action. In this sense, singing is a kind of extension or one of the methods of the *vachika abhinaya* or the speech. In the Sanskrit theatre, there is a provision for musical recitation or occasional singing of the verses along with the prose dialogues, but the predominance of the prose speech and straight recitation is always there. In the traditional *natyas*, the situation is reversed, with singing as the chief element, and a secondary place for the prose speech which is mostly improvised by the players during the performance, for introducing wit and humour. Invariably, there is immense variety in the use of singing—sometimes by the characters individually or in chorus, sometimes by the *sutradhara* alone or with his companions, and sometimes jointly by characters and the *sutradhara*, and so on.

The instrumental music, though it has a different





Madhyama Vyayoga
(Bhasa) - Sanskrit,
Dir. K.N. Panikkar

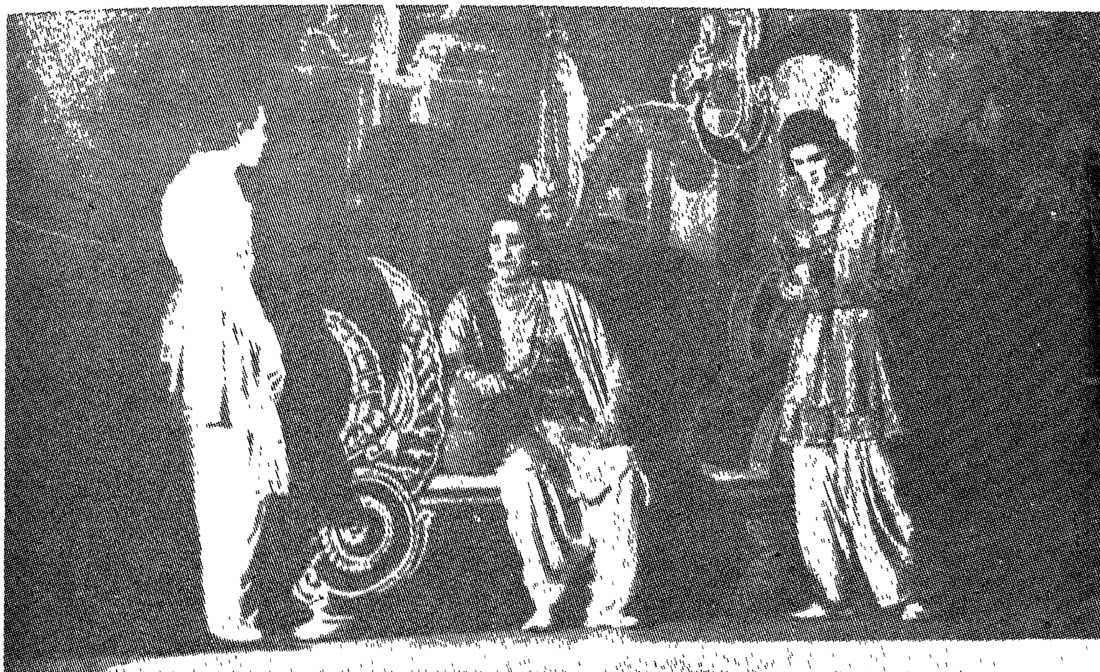
Abhijnana
Shakuntala (Kalidasa)
Marathi,



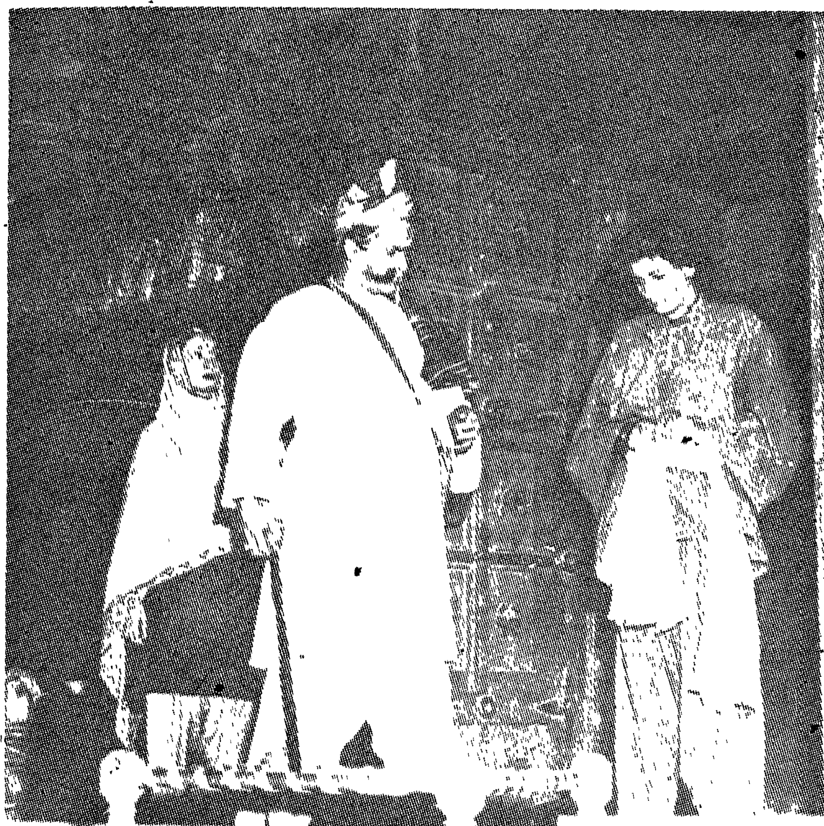
Yakshagana
(Traditional
performance)
Kannada



Swang/Nautanki
(Traditional
performance)



Sita Vanavas (Agha Hashra) - Hindi. Parsi Theatre



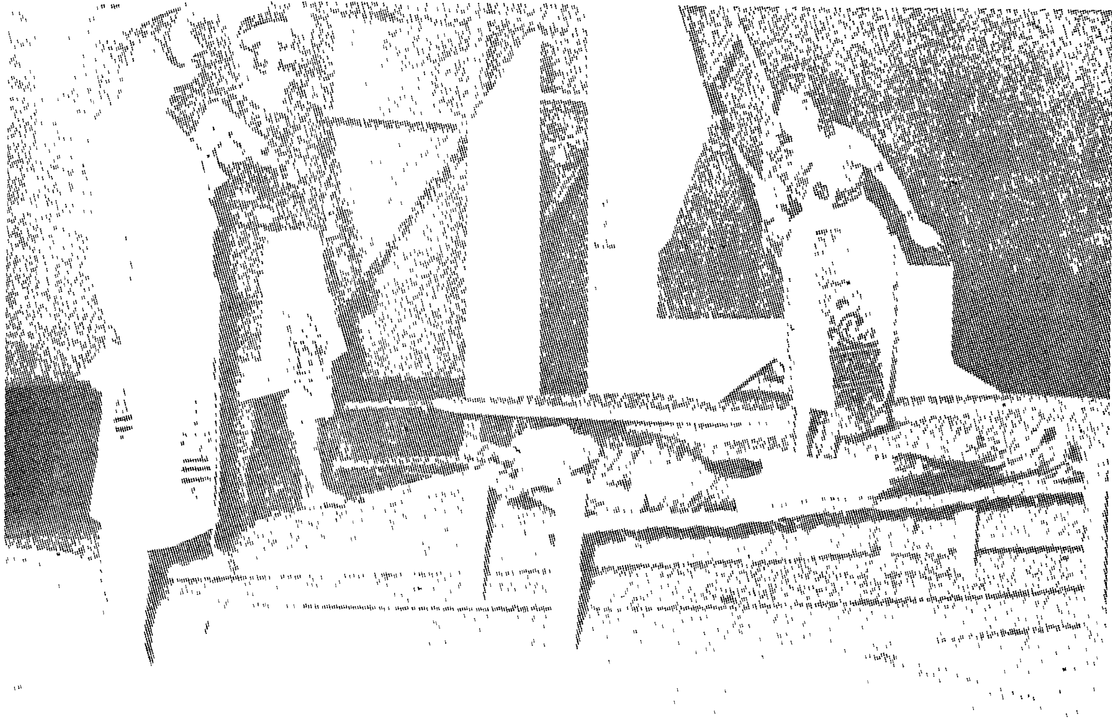
Pathan (Lalchand Bismil) - Hindi,- Dir. Prithviraj Kapoor



Angaar (Utpal Dutt)
Benglai,
Dir. Utpal Dutt



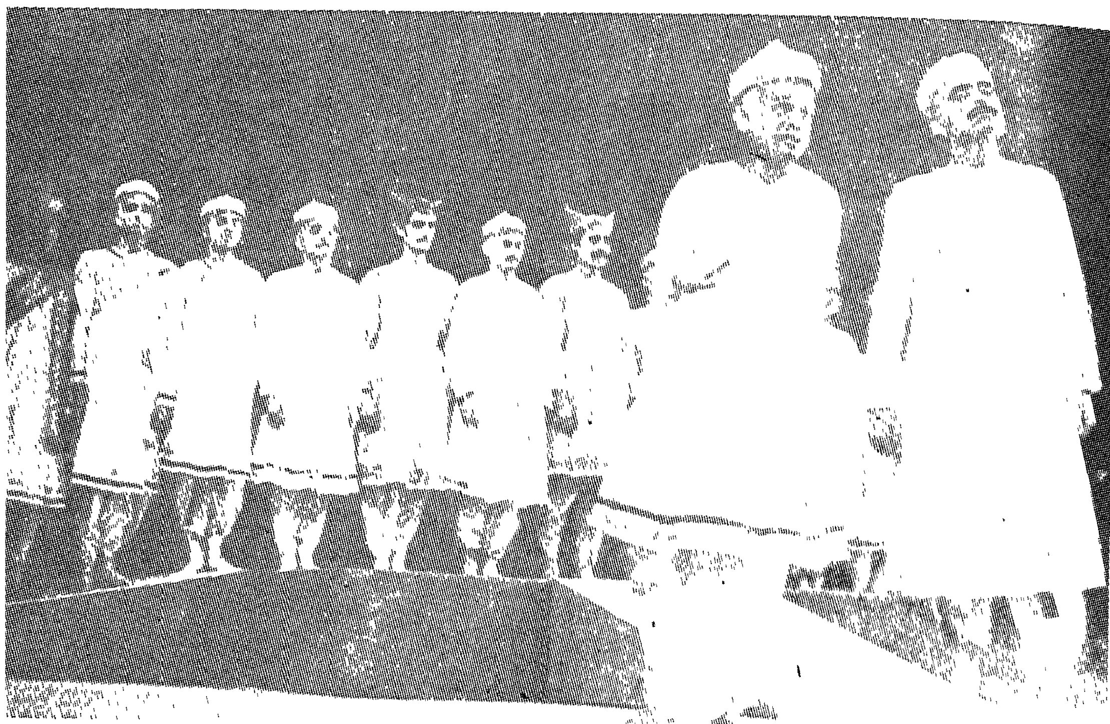
Charandas Chor
(Habib Tanvir)
Chhattisgarhi,



Shuturmurg (Gyandev Agnihotri) - Hindi, Dir. Shyamanand Jalan



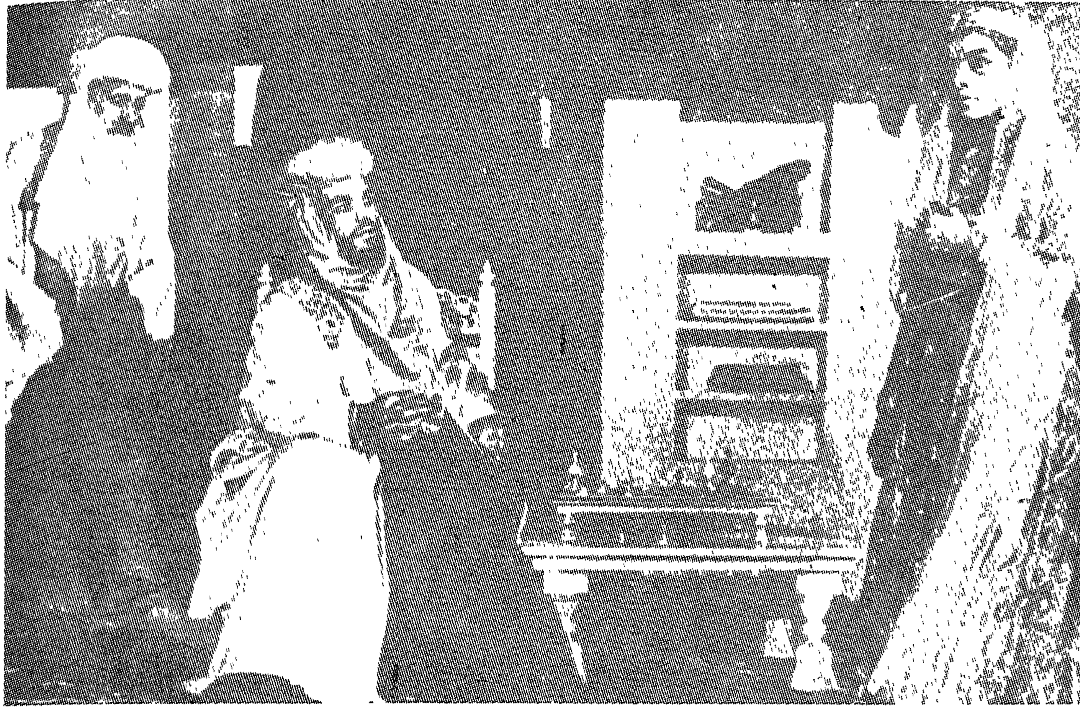
Raja Oidipous (Sophocles) - Bengali, Dir. Sombhu Mitra



Ghasiram Kotwal (Vijay Tendulkar) - Hindi, Dir. Rajindernath



Jasma Odan (ShantaGandhi) - Hindi, Dir. ShantaGandhi



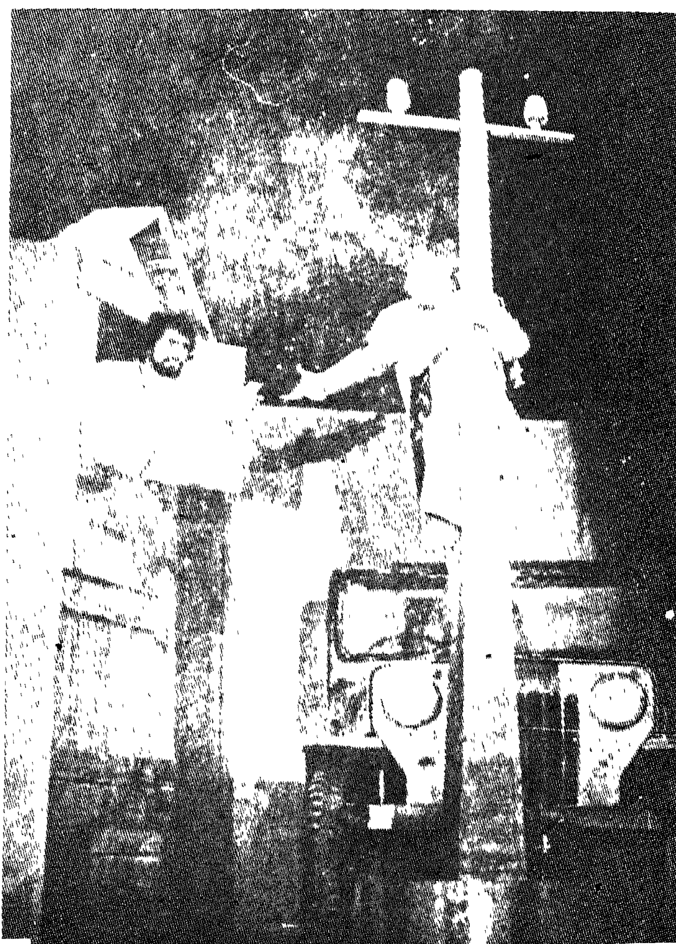
Tughlaq (Girish Karnad) Hindi, Dir. E. Alkazi



Jo Kumar Swamy (Chandra Shekhar Kambar) Kannada,



anoosh (Bhishma
ahni) - Hindi,
Dir. B.V. Karanth



Chopra Kamal Naukar
Jamal (Bertolt Brecht)
- Hindi,



Barnam Vana (Macbeth-Shakespeare) - Hindi, Dir. B.V. Karanth

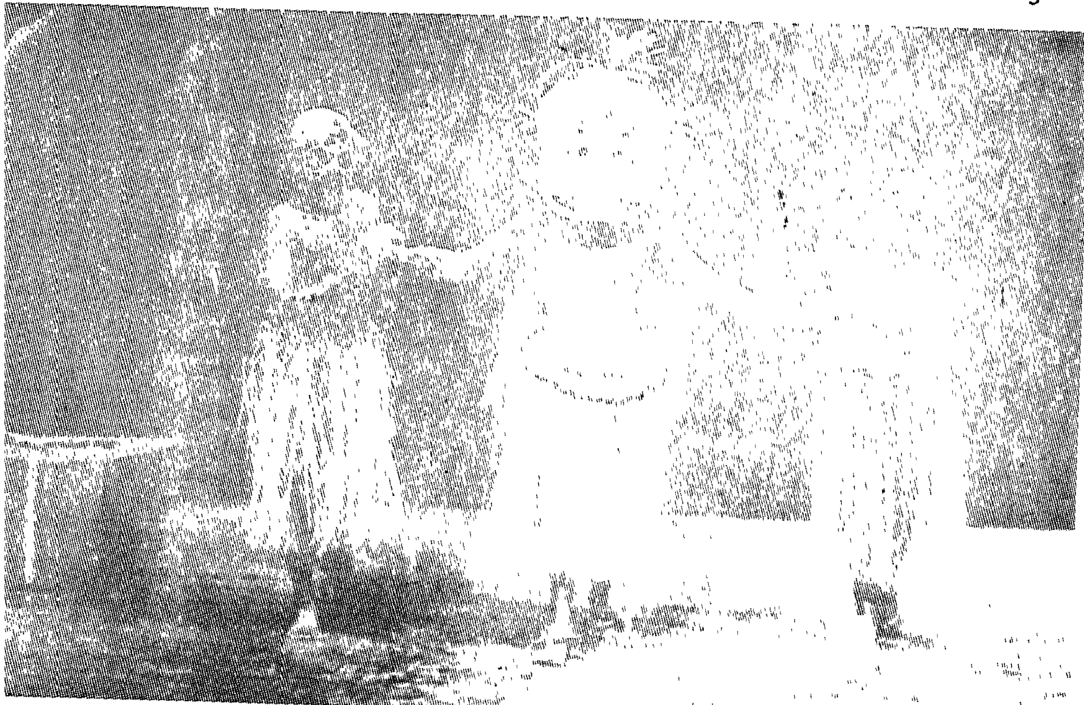


Kamala (Vijay Tendulkar) - Marathi, Dir. Kamalakar Sarang



Turkira Avalam
(Antigone-Sophocles)
Tamil,
Dir. M. Ramaswami

Mudheywi
(G.Shankar Pillai)
Malayalam,
Dir. S.,Ramanujam





Andha Yug (Dharmavir Bharati) - Hindi, Dir. Bansi Kaul



Leima Yeng Lingei Khunu Kaba (Ratan Thiyam) - Manipuri,
Dir. Ratan Thiyam



Virasat (Mahesh Elkunchwar) - Hindi, Dir. Satyadev Dubey



Adhe Adhure (Mohan Rakesh) - Hindi, Dir. Suresh Bharadwaj

dramatic place in the structure of the performance, is no less important. Besides creating a conducive atmosphere in the beginning of the performance, it underlines, or helps in emphasizing or sharpening, a mental state. The place of the Nakkara in the Swang and Nautanki, of the Bhungal in the Bhavai, of the Dolak in the Tamasha, or the Maddal in the Yakshagana, is integral, indispensable and distinct for creating a dramatic impact.

Music as an independent attractive element also plays a role in the traditional theatre. Its use makes a familiar and frequently witnessed episode more interesting and pleasant, not only for the ordinary but also the discriminating spectators. The traditional *natyas* of each region incorporate many fascinating and haunting folk tunes which enhance considerably the total impact of the performance. In the use of these lilting tunes, the knowledge and imagination of the *sutradhara* or the singer-performer play an important role. It is not necessary that the same tunes be used in every performance of the same story. Often different tunes are incorporated according to the requirements of different performances, or the accomplishment and convenience of the performers. Similarly, for the same story different groups choose different tunes or songs which give the productions of the same episode by different troupes a distinctive and original flavour. Also, there is always a very spontaneous and smooth blend of the classical and the folk music in the traditional theatre. The synthesis or transfusion of the classical and the popular, the *Margi* and the *Deshi*, in music, is similar to other aspects of drama and performance.

In this context, it must be noted that the traditional theatre has contributed tremendously in making music widely popular among the common people of

the country. It has made the spectators effortlessly familiar with the folk music and many *Ragas* of the classical music, even if they do not have any technical knowledge about them. This constant exposure to music for more than a thousand years has made it an integral part of the taste and sensibility of the common man, to the extent that today it is difficult, in our country, to think of a popular performance without music. No wonder, even a new, modern, machine-based performance medium like the film is almost unthinkable in India without songs as one of its indispensable elements.

But the quantum of music in different *natyas* is not uniform or similar. On the one hand, there are *natyas* like the Sangeet or Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh and the Sang of Haryana, which are totally musical, and have almost no prose dialogue. Not only their play-scripts are in verse, but are also sung out by the performers. The Rasleela of Manipur, the Bidesia of Bihar or the narrative modes like the Burrakatha of Andhra and the Pandvani of Madhya Pradesh are also more or less similar in their preponderance of music. On the other hand, there are *Natyas* like the Jatra of Bengal, the Ankia Nat of Assam, the Bhand Pathra of Kashmir and the Karyala of Himachal Pradesh, in which prose dialogues are in abundance or prominent. In the Tamasha, Bhavai, Khyal, Mach, Terukuttu, the singing though not as much as in the Nautanki is certainly there in varying proportions. In many *natyas*, a character sings only the first line of a song which is then completed by the singers present in the background, or by other performers.

In the *natyas* of South India, like the Yakshagana, Bhagavatamela, Kuchipudi, Veethinataka, Terukuttu and others, singing is done not by the characters themselves but by the *sutradhara* or *bhagavata*. This

difference is related partly to the place of dance in these *natyas*. Most of the theatrical modes of the South have a preponderance of dances. It is not difficult to understand the reasons. Even in the *Natyashastra*, the Southern (*Dakshinatya*) style is characterised by the *Kaishiki Vritti* or the predominance of dance and music. In the Tamasha, Bhavai, Ankia Nat, there is dancing, but it comes in between songs or the songs and the prose dialogues. In the Sang, Khyal, Mach, it is similar and in the Jatra now it is mostly as a group dance in the beginning of a performance. In the Sangeet or Nautanki it is almost absent or used as a conventional interlude in a court scene.

As the singing or the *vachika abhinaya* in the traditional theatre is an extension of the speech, the dance is the extension of the movement or the *angika abhinaya*, which plays many roles in a performance. In the *poorvaranga*, the dance is almost ritualistic, but elsewhere it either intensifies the idea expressed in the song or the speech of the characters and in the comment of the *sutradhara*, or expresses the mental state of the characters, or indicates passing of the time, or is, sometimes, only for entertainment. The sources of dance, as of music, in the traditional theatre are both the classical and the popular. There are many echoes and elements of the classical dances, and simultaneously the folk dances, original or modified according to the needs of the stage of the specific theatrical mode, are also incorporated. In many *natyas*, the steps, movements, gestures, poses, postures, etc. have come from martial dances and ritualistic enactments.

As music has given a kind of lyricism and rhythmic quality to the speech in the traditional theatre, similarly, and more importantly, dance has infused

the movement with rhythm and grace. In many ways, the rhythmic movement is one of the main attractions of these theatrical performances as well as the basis of the stylization in their acting. It is important to note that to a certain extent, the difference between the classical concepts of the *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* has lost its sharpness in the regional *natyas*, or, to state it differently, there is such a fusion of the *natyadharmi* and the *lokadharmi* in the traditional theatre that it is difficult to differentiate one from the other or to identify them separately. In fact, they clearly underline the fact that the term *lokadharmi* is not synonymous with the 'realistic'. The *lokadharmi* is also a form of stylization in which there is no permanent, pre-determined codification of gesture, movement, or speech, but the everyday movement, gesture, the elements of speech or sound are used according to the requirements of a performance.

Another interesting feature of the traditional theatre is the special role of two characters, the *sutradhara* and the *vidushaka*, though they are called differently in different regions or *natyas*. For instance, the *sutradhara* is *bhagavata* in most of the South Indian *natyas*, *nayak* in the Bhavai, *ranga* in the Nautanki, *swami* in the Rasleela and *sutradhara* in the Ankia Nat. Similarly, the *vidushaka* is called *songadya* in the Tamasha and *maskara* in the Bhand Pathra, *hanumanayaka* in the Yakshagana, *rangla* in the Bhavai, *mansukha* in the Rasleela and just *vidushaka* in many other *natyas*.

The *sutradhara* is an important character in all the traditional theatrical modes and this is understandable. In the absence of a definite pre-written text, working with an eclectically assembled production script, it becomes necessary that someone chooses the story of the performance, determines and organises

the required elements of poetry, music, dance, etc., teaches all these to the performers. The *sutradhara* of the traditional theatre performs all these functions. In many *natyas*, he is also the writer or creator of the scripts. He himself sings on the stage, and controls the rhythm of the music and dance either by a pair of small cymbals or some other means. It is he who communicates the informative and expositionary elements of the story, in verse or in prose, comments on the dramatic action, and when required also assumes some small roles.

It is evident that to carry out all this it is necessary for him to be present on the stage all the time during the performance. Thus, the *sutradhara* of the traditional theatre, though a continuation from the Sanskrit theatre, is fundamentally different from it. In a Sanskrit play, the *sutradhara* appeared in the beginning, gave some necessary information about the play and the playwright, and then made his exit generally after starting the performance. It was not necessary for him after that to appear on the stage; probably, he controlled the performance from backstage or *nepathya*. In some plays, there is also an indication of his assuming some role, but even there, the other characters of the play were more important. But in the traditional *natyas*, the presence of the *sutradhara* on stage is so continuous, many-sided and central that often he appears to be the most important character and the performer. It would, therefore, be fair to conclude that the concept, situation and role of the *sutradhara* has undergone a very relevant dramatic development in the traditional theatre.

The *vidushaka* of the Sanskrit theatre also has undergone a similar transformation. In the traditional theatre, he is no more the gluttonous, funnily made

up or dressed friend of the hero. Here he is, frequently, an independent character, who has the freedom to appear whenever required, to say and do anything. He carries out the unique function of relating the episodes and characters of a story from a mythical or imaginary context, unfamiliar time and place, to the contemporary situations and individuals. He has the liberty to use his imagination, wit, sense of humour and satire to comment on the topical or local events and persons, and absurdity or injustice or inappropriateness of their ways and life.

The importance of this extraordinary privilege of the *vidushaka* is seen in its most unusual from in Kutiyattam of Kerala. There he continuously explains and comments upon the utterings of the hero of the Sanskrit play, in the local language, Malayalam, his interventions are often longer than the play itself. and frequently, continue for hours, even days. Nobody, including gods, heroes, kings or ordinary persons as well as the scriptures—absolutely nobody and nothing—is exempt from his satirical comments. In fact, this inventive and amusing method of making the over familiar mythical themes refreshingly contemporary and relevant, is woven into the very fabric of the traditional theatre. The *vidushaka* or some similar character in these *natyas* is certainly the source of entertainment. humour and comedy, but more than that he projects the reactions of the audience. In a sense, he is the representative or the very voice of the spectators. This device of the traditional theatre is an extremely interesting evidence of its flexibility and its search for contemporary relevance.

Yet another feature of the traditional theatre deserves to be mentioned. Different from the Sanskrit theatre, in the later *natyas*, with some solitary exceptions,

women performers are absent and men act the female roles. One of the reasons for this must have been the social conditions created by the Muslim rule. But this practice is prevalent without exception even in the *natyas* of South India, where the impact of the Muslim rule was not so extensive or deep, and where the tradition of women dancers in the temples continued all through.

The real reason for this situation, therefore, is probably to be found in the very conditions of these performances. The Sanskrit plays were mostly performed either in the *rangamandapas* in the palaces or in the temples, where the number of spectators was usually quite limited. In contrast, the traditional performances are staged in open fields, under the sky, before hundreds or even thousands of spectators, continuing for whole night. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the pitch and breath required for singing, and physical strength and stamina for dancing, in the traditional theatre was not found quite suitable for women. Similarly, the difficult life of the travelling companies and consequent possibility of facing all kinds of untoward situations, coupled with the general lack of protection due to political instability, may have prevented women from participating in the performances.

Anyway, the absence of women in the theatre continued for this entire period of about one thousand years. Only in the Tamasha of Maharashtra, which emerged from its religious moorings towards the end of the 18th century, under the Peshwa rule, professional singing and dancing women very soon replaced the young handsome boys who used to act the *nachya* or the dancer. In no other theatrical performance women participated until the latter half of the 20th century. Thus, in many *natyas*,

impersonating women came to be regarded as a kind of distinct mark of an actor's talent. In the Bhavai, the performances of Jai Shankar Sundari, who died a few years back, and in the Kuchipudi, Vedantam Satyanarayana even today, in female roles, have been so extraordinary and distinguished that those who have seen them can never forget the experience. For them it becomes impossible even to imagine that any women can render those roles with that kind of artistic skill and subtlety.

It would be useful to mention here a few details about the stage of the traditional *natyas*. These are all totally open-air performances, probably with only two exceptions. One, the Kutiyattam of Kerala which is performed in a special auditorium called *koottampalam*, permanently constructed in a temple campus. The other is the Ankia Nat or Bhaona of Assam, for which a very beautiful temporary structure called *bhaonaghar* is constructed with cloth, bamboo and wood. For no other traditional performance any covered theatre is used.

In fact, the very beginnings of the medieval *natyas* are associated with their coming out of the confines of the financial protection of the kings and aristocrats and the physical limitations of their palaces. The theatre activity, which in the age of the Sanskrit theatre had been transferred from the people and open spaces to the ruling classes and their exclusive residences, and had been nourished there, returned in the middle ages, to the life of the people, with neither any pre-constructed stage nor any auditorium. Now the plays could be performed only in the open spaces of villages and towns outside the temples or on the streets, and were performed there. The temporary or permanent platforms for these performances were constructed wherever possible, and where it could not

be done, the space for acting, in circular, square or rectangular shapes, was cleared and marked out on the ground itself. Under the open sky, mostly in the light of oil-soaked torches, the theatre began afresh its miraculous journey.

In all our traditional *natyas*, the form of the stage has been and continues to be more or less like this, with occasional minor differences or changes. In a Yakshagana performance, the stage is created either on ground or on wooden platforms by placing banana trunks on four corners. In the Bhavai, the acting area, called *padh*, is created on the ground with the spectators sitting on three sides. In the Mach, an eight or ten feet high scaffold is constructed for the performance. In the Bhagat of Agra region, the scaffold stage was constructed on public roads, but it was so high that conveyances could pass underneath, and, sometimes, for special dramatic situations, the buildings on both sides of the road, could also be used. The Tamasha, Jatra, Nautanki, Khyal, Rasleela etc., are all staged on platforms made of wood, earth or cement. In some of them a back curtain, plain or decorated, called *pichhwai*, is hung and the spectators sit on two or three sides. In some others, they are also all around the platform. In the Ramleela of Uttar Pradesh, in many places, different episodes of the story are performed in different places on different days. In the Ramleela of Ramnagar (Varanasi) and Agra, the locales of the episodes are fixed in different parts of the city and the spectators spontaneously assemble there to see their enactment.

The simplicity of the stage and the freedom from dependence on expensive means were indispensable pre-conditions of the growth and long life of the traditional theatre. Totally related to the life of people and based on their involvement and patronage, this

theatre activity could not have continued in any other manner. On such a stage, the question of any kind of stage decoration or setting just does not arise. Only the *pati* or half curtain and a few stage properties can be mentioned which are used in most of the traditional performances.

The most important visual elements of these *natyas* are the costumes, make-up, or, in some cases, the masks of the performers. Even in this, there is tremendous variety and unevenness, and many patterns and levels of spectacle can be seen, beginning with the costumes and almost the other-worldly headgears of the Yakshagana, Rasleela, Ramleela etc., to more or less the everyday costumes of the Tamasha. In many *natyas*, there is sometimes an attempt to relate the costumes to a period, specially for the historical characters, which often depends upon the popularity and financial prosperity of the troupe. But otherwise, specially in the costumes of mythological characters, some kind of stylization is common.

Lastly, the most important and distinct characterstic of these *natyas*, continuing for hundreds of years, is their unquestioned and unparalleled popularity in their specific regions. In many ways, they are intimately connected with their regional communities. Even today, their performances attract thousands of spectators, who watch them with total involvement and express their appreciation or displeasure in uninhibited comments. Frequently, they make critical and subtle comparisons with the performances of the same episode by different troupes and actors. Indeed, in a deeper and significant manner, they are not merely the spectators but also participants in the performances.

For a meaningful assessment of this theatre tra-

dition, it is very necessary to understand its deep roots in the life of the people. As a matter of fact, this theatre has, on the one hand, the technical virtuosity and brilliance acquired through the practice and experience for centuries, and, on the other, immense vitality on account of being closely related to life on many levels. At the same time, in the particular structure of our society, this theatre has also been the vehicle of the basic values and beliefs of Indian life. It can be said that this theatre has played a leading role in keeping different regions, different communities of the same region, and various classes and castes of the same place, united and related, and in maintaining a constant dialogue among them.

From this point of view, our medieval theatre is much more significant and relevant than the Saṇskrit theatre, even if it does not always have as much artistic refinement and excellence. But creative expression cannot always and in all cases be evaluated only by one criterion. This theatre is significant because of its vitality and close relation with the life of the people as well as its originality and inventiveness. It is also an evidence of the creative power of Indian psyche which, after the disintegration of the Sanskrit theatre and in the completely changed circumstances, evolved such an inclusive, wide and enduring theatre culture, sustaining its relevance for centuries. It seems more logical, therefore, to record this as a phase of development of Indian theatre rather than one of its decline.

But to underline the importance of this theatre tradition is not to overlook its limitations or to ignore its inherent contradictions. There is no doubt that in spite of the emergence of new forms between the 17th and 19th centuries, and expression of the changing social and cultural awareness in them, there were

signs of stagnation in this framework of Indian theatre. The new energy, which had permeated the regional language *natyas* after the decline of the Sanskrit theatre, and which had found an exuberant manifestation in the *Bhakti Yuga*, was gradually getting exhausted. In the environment of fresh political and social instability, the inspiration of the devotional sentiment was no more effective. The collective experience incorporated in the all too familiar mythological stories, though still attracting the spectators, was gradually losing its grip due to constant repetition.

The new non-religious *natyas* with their changed themes had greater attraction, but even they tended to become repetitive and to increasingly take up mythological themes. In many of them, there are definite written scripts, but without any original creative quality. They certainly met the requirements of effective staging, but on the level of idea, feeling and experience, did not bring any new dimension. The entire theatre marked time at one point, could not go forward, and though somehow continued the traditional methods, it could not save itself from becoming more and more colourless and impoverished.

While this theatre, on account of its inner contradictions and lack of external encouragement and patronage, was in a state of stagnation, a new and, probably, more powerful political, economic and social system and totally different culture, secured a foothold in the country, which culminated in the establishment of the British rule in India in the 19th century. This domination by the western culture had many long-range consequences for almost all aspects of Indian life and activity, but in the field of theatre it created an entirely unprecedented crisis.

Now, big cities arose in the country, which soon

became main centres of the new life-style. A new type of theatre began to take shape there which had a very tenuous or no relation at all with our own long performance tradition, but which on account of its relation with the taste and likings of the new ruling class—as also because of its distinctiveness and power—became the main theatre style of the country. As a result, for the first time, a fatal alienation between our rural and urban theatre developed which gradually changed the very contours of our dramatic activity at all the levels.

In the cities, a new kind of dramatic writing and stage presentation, imitating the western drama and theatre, began which were totally alien to the Indian theatre tradition of the previous twenty-five centuries or more. On the other hand, the theatre activity of the traditional kind became completely confined to the country-side and was forced to carry on its struggle for existence as best it could. This situation proved to be disastrous for both the urban modern theatre and the rural traditional *natyas*. While the urban theatre lost its contact with its own long, continuous tradition, the traditional theatre activity, confined to the countryside, had more and more difficulty in getting any patronage, specially from the influential and powerful sections of the society. As a result, the possibility of attracting new talent, imbibing new ideas and acquiring fresh vitality became more and more meagre, because now all the resources of the society were getting concentrated upon the exciting possibilities of the new urban theatre.

The traditional theatre of different regions is alive and also more or less popular even today. But on the basis of the state in which it now exists, its real and excellent quality can only be surmised or imagined. With the gradual expansion of the industrial social

order in the modern age, its patronage base and area of appeal have been rapidly shrinking. During the last few decades, its very existence is threatened by the explosion in the field of communication. Today, questions about the relevance of the traditional modes are being raised repeatedly and with ever-increasing urgency. Have they some purpose or role any more? Can they now survive? Is it at all possible or worth-while to save them? It is very necessary to find answers to these questions in the social, cultural, specially the theatrical context of today. Only then we would be able to understand, mould or participate in the new, extensive and fundamental changes which are imminent in our theatre after almost a thousand years.

Chapter 3

Modern Age: New Struggles and Explorations

It has already been mentioned that our encounter with the West during the 19th century had wide-ranging political, economic, social and cultural consequences. In the field of theatre, however, this encounter changed almost everything—its form, direction, pace. Indian theatre had gone through changes on many levels earlier also. But during the previous two or three thousand years, it had taken new forms according to our own world-view, on the basis of one or the other aspect of our culture, and under compulsions of our own social and political conditions. Its directions and pace also were determined by the rhythm of Indian life. Specially, it had no inner dichotomy and its fundamental form and aesthetic basis was almost the same for the entire country in the phase of the Sanskrit theatre, and for the entire community in different language regions in the phase of the medieval traditional theatre, though the urban and rural theatre activities even in these periods were not always entirely similar in their complexity, refinement or methods.

But the new theatre which emerged in our country under the impact of the western culture was totally different in all these aspects, because it had taken shape in imitation of an alien theatre, fundamentally different in its world-view and aesthetic approach. According to the Indian view of life, the purpose of drama and theatre was to create a feeling of pleasure or bliss (*Rasa*) by delineating different situations, mental states and feelings of human beings. The purpose of the Western drama, on the other hand, was to reveal struggles of life in their various forms. In the Western outlook, some kind of conflict between gods and man, man and man, man and nature, and between various emotions, desires and tendencies within man himself, that is at almost every level, is inevitable. It was, therefore, difficult to conceive of drama without some form of conflict.

Consistent with this difference between the two world-views, the western theatre, from the ancient Greek days to the 19th century, had developed under conditions and in forms totally different from the Indian theatre. For one, staging of plays there had started and continued in the capitals of the city states of Greece, in the open-air or closed theatres specially made for this purpose. Their methods were quite different from the presentation styles of the Indian theatre. In spite of an element of stylization, they emphasised imitation of reality, which eventually, in course of time, took the form of insistence on realistic or naturalistic approach. In view of such importance of reality or realism, acting in plays on the western stage had only a limited scope for the introduction of music and dance or the use of presentational devices and mime. Gradually, particularly in the 18th-19th centuries, even these limited possibilities disappeared. As a result of this, to some extent, the musical or the

dance and mime based theatrical forms, like the Opera, Pantomime and Ballet, developed in Europe independently, outside the regular drama.

It is, however, evident that the western drama and theatre with which India became familiar in the 19th century, were in every respect different from the Indian drama and theatre—not only from the various regional theatrical practices prevalent at that time in the country, but also from the Sanskrit drama and theatre. Normally, any exchange between two such totally different theatre cultures would have been difficult, or even if it did take place, it would be of some minor, isolated characteristics or methods. But the circumstances of the contact of these two theatre cultures in India were extremely unusual. The western drama and theatre entered our country as elements of the culture of the conquerors, who, in a well-planned manner, deliberately tried to prove that compared to the Western the Indian culture was inferior, trivial and undeveloped. The British rulers introduced an educational system which, on the one hand, cleverly devalued Indian history and cultural traditions, and, on the other, made the most outstanding aspects of the western culture and literature more and more familiar to the Indian elite and the newly emerging middle classes in the urban centres. Since then till today, the Indians receiving this new western education have been learning that the Sanskrit drama is not only inferior to the dramatic works of the Greek, Shakespearean or other European playwrights, but is, in fact, no drama at all, and at best could be considered as ornate and exaggerated dramatic poetry.

Since there was no continued tradition of the Sanskrit play-production, there was little possibility of any discussion about it at that time. The traditional theatrical performances of different regions were

exiled from the land of the theatre as mere rural entertainment and, for various reasons, an attitude of contempt or indifference towards them developed among our own people. Altogether, presuming a kind of theatrical vacuum in India, a campaign by the 'civilised' Englishmen to initiate the 'backward' Indians into the theatre culture, or by the Indians themselves to acquire that culture, started in right earnest.

Thus, the new theatre which began in our country in the middle of the 19th century was, if not a total imposition, almost entirely an imitation of the western theatre. Its patrons and practitioners were those aristocratic Indians who had enthusiastically accepted not only the political domination of the Englishmen, but also their social and cultural domination, and who with their newly acquired English education took a kind of pride in behaving like the rulers. As a result, they started staging, initially, some English plays in English and then their translations and adaptations into their own languages, culminating finally, in plays based on Indian themes written and staged in imitation of the western plays.

In this context, it is also important to note that this theatre started, continued and was accepted only by the newly educated Indians in the cities. In some regions, productions of the newly formed travelling professional theatre companies did occasionally reach a few small towns and were also appreciated there. But the new theatre did not make any contact with the country-side where in different regions the traditional theatre continued to be active and popular.

Moreover, this new theatre began and developed primarily in those cities or settlements, which were founded by the English merchants and the British rulers, or where their commercial, industrial or administrative centres were located. That is the

reason why this theatre got so much more patronage and encouragement in new cities like Calcutta, Bombay, and to some extent in Madras, than in other regions. With the spread and consolidation of the British rule, this theatre reached almost all parts of the country, but it did not start in all regions at the same time, nor did it grow everywhere to the same extent. As a result, its achievements, whatever they are, have different levels in different languages and regions of the country. In Bengali and Marathi, it became most active, prosperous and popular, though the beginning and the subsequent development of the theatres of even these two languages have been considerably different.

In Bengali, the rise and almost the entire expansion of the modern theatre was confined to Calcutta, which was the first main centre of the East India Company, and later the capital of the British rulers. To some extent, on account of the land settlement policy enforced by the British, most of the princelings, landlords and other aristocrats of Bengal preferred to stay in Calcutta, so that they could be nearer the rulers and seat of power and derive maximum advantage from this proximity. A number of them were cultivated persons in their own way and had inclination as well as time and resources in great abundance, which enabled them to take interest in and patronise art and literature. They also easily got opportunities to receive English education and to be initiated into and influenced by the western culture. It is understandable that to these Bengali aristocrats, their main traditional theatre, the Jatra, might have appeared crude and backward, and since no tradition of the Sanskrit theatre was extant, they were naturally attracted and overwhelmed by the novelty, power and effectiveness of the western drama and theatre.

Thus, the modern Bengali theatre began at their initiative in their large palaces or sprawling garden houses, then gradually spread to other sections of Bengali society, and has continued to this day in spite of many ups and downs. This theatre grew almost entirely in imitation of the model of the western drama and performance, indeed, of the model of the decadent, ornamental Victorian theatre of the mid-nineteenth century in England. There is hardly any contribution of the Sanskrit or the mediaeval Indian theatre traditions in its growth, or is confined only to writing and staging plays based on mythological and historical episodes, folk tales and legends.

In many other aspects, this new Bengali theatre became the most advanced and powerful theatre of the country. Being totally concentrated in Calcutta, the theatre groups, first amateur and then professional, which sprang up there, continued their precarious existence in keen competition with one another. Many playhouses were also constructed, which witnessed the formation and dissolution of different companies from time to time. Thus, only in Calcutta, an urban residential theatre on the model of the western world, specially of London, came into existence and has survived. As a result, many talented actors emerged, who were often also playwrights, directors and managers of their companies. A large urban audience was also created. By 1940, within a period of about 100 years, highly gifted actors like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Ardhendu Mustafi, Amrital Basu, Amarendra Nath Dutt, Amritlal Mitra, Surendra Nath Ghosh, Shishir Bhaduri, carried the Bengali theatre to the pinnacle of its glory.

Probably, because of its residential character, the Bengali theatre was the first to attract women performers. In the theatres of all other languages of

the country, women came to the stage very much later—by the middle of the 20th century. In most other places, women started acting on stage only after Independence. Even in Maharashtra, where in the traditional *natya*, the Tamasha, women had been performing for a long time, on the modern Marathi stage the female roles were always performed by men. The only exception to this, probably, is the Surabhi Natak Mandali of Andhra Pradesh, in whose plays women of one single family, generation after generation, have been acting with the men folk of the same family. There is no doubt that the new theatre presented for both men and women in the city a form of expression which had, for centuries, never been available to them.

Obviously, the acting style of this new theatre had hardly any relation with the methods or approach of the classical or traditional acting styles of the country. Its basic inspiration and model of style and technique had come from the western theatre and its famous actors, even though some Indian actors may have occasionally used or found suitable for their work, some of the practices and devices of their own traditional theatre. In any case, the magic of this new theatre, specially that of actors and their unique and attractive performances, created a very large audience in the middle class, educated sections of Calcutta, in fact, of entire Bengal, to the extent that a craze for theatre became a distinctive characteristic of an educated Bengali.

Another important feature of this theatre deserves to be noted. On account of its special nature, and partly because of the influence of the English dramatic literature, particularly of Shakespeare, through English education, the written text and playwright got central importance in this new theatrical activity. From the

very beginning, the Bengali poets and prose writers were drawn towards playwriting. From the middle of the 19th century till the end of the fourth decade of the 20th century, dramatists like Michael Madhu Sudan Dutt, Deenbandhu Mitra, Girish Chandra Ghosh, D.L. Roy, Kshirod Prasad Vidyavinod, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Manmath Ray, Sachin Sengupta and many others wrote hundreds of plays for this new stage, after the models of Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, and others.

The stories of these plays are drawn from Indian mythological episodes, folk tales, historical events as well as contemporary social situations, though sometimes the stories or echoes of some popular Muslim or the western legends or tales are also here. But the structure of these plays is akin to Shakespeare's plays or, later, to the naturalistic plays. They attempt to present the conflict of an individual with his environment, social conditions, with other individuals or within his own mind, and the characters are conceived or developed as in the western plays. On the whole, with very few exceptions, the creative achievements of these plays is negligible, and they are generally little more than stageable melodramas. They have neither any deeper or perceptive exploration of the inner contradictions of human character nor an explosive irony of situations. Not only do they lack creative insight, but an innovation in the dramatic form or an imaginative original structure are also quite rare.

Probably, the only exception is Rabindra Nath Tagore, who, specially in his plays like *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders) *Muktadhara*, *Raja* (King of the Dark Chamber), *Dakghar* (Post Office), has given form to poetry of life with an unusually original dramatic vision. In these plays, there is an attempt to capture

and present basic contradictions of life in a bigger perspective and with contemporary relevance; there is also a bold and creative experiment to synthesize some of the techniques and dramatic usages of the Sanskrit theatre and the traditional modes like the Jatra with the methods of the western theatre.

Indicative of the general imitative approach and its limitations during this period is the fact that, in obedience to the evaluation of the western critics, the plays of Rabindra Nath Tagore, like the Sanskrit drama, were regarded by many Indians as mere dramatic poems, or poetic drama. As a result, they were very rarely performed on the Bengali stage and had very little impact. It was only after the memorable production of *Raktakarabi* by Sombhu Mitra in the sixth decade of this century that his plays began to be recognised, to some extent, as valid drama.

The other big centres of trade and industry of the Englishmen were in the western coastal regions of the country. In the languages of that region also, therefore, the new theatre on the western model had begun in the middle of the 19th century. As in Bengali, the new theatrical activity in Marathi and Gujarati also became very popular, though in many ways the theatres of both these languages were different from the Bengali theatre as also of each other.

The initial source of inspiration of the Marathi theatre, unlike the Bengali theatre, was more or less in our traditional theatrical performances with strong elements of music and dance. Some idea of this can be had from the first Marathi play *Seeta Swayamwara* written by Vishnudas Bhave, a court poet of the Sangli ruler, which was inspired by the Dashavatara of Maharashtra and the Yakshagana of Karnataka. Probably, on account of this different beginning, the place of music in some form or the other persisted in

the later development of the Marathi theatre, in spite of its imitation of the western model not only in dramatic writing but in many other ways. There was a phase in which the excess of the classical Indian singing made acting and other dramatic aspects secondary in a Marathi theatrical performance. Many top ranking classical musicians began to act in the plays of the professional dramatic companies, to which the audiences flocked more to hear music than to see a play.

After Vishnudas Bhave, the next important actor-playwright in Marathi was Vasant Panduranga alias Anna Sahib Kirloskar. He too is famous for his muscial plays like *Shakuntala* and *Saubhadra* which he staged with his own independent theatre company. But, in spite of the productions of these plays and occasional performances of Sanskrit plays in Marathi, the western dramatic and theatrical model was taking over even in Marathi. This is evident from the original plays like *Sharada* and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by Kirloskar's contemporary, Govind Ballal Deval, and then by plays of Krishnaji Prabhakar alias Kaka Saheb Khadilkar, like *Keechakavadha*, *Bhaubandaki*, *Manapamana*. All these plays have, more or less, a Shakespearean structure. It is an interesting irony that though Khadilkar had accepted the English model in his plays, he was otherwise an important leader of the national freedom movement and as such was strongly opposed to the British rule or domination. So much so that his plays were considered anti-government and the performance of his play, *Keechakavadha*, was banned by the colonial rulers.

With the plays of Khadilkar's successor, the famous Ram Ganesh Gadakari, *Ekach Pyala* and *Bhava Bandhana*, and later with the realistic prose plays of

Mama Warerkar and others, the western dramatic model was totally and firmly established in the Marathi theatre, though the demand and liking for the musical plays also continued among some sections of the spectators.

As in other languages, the greatest contribution in making and then keeping the new theatre popular among the people was made by the actors. The Marathi theatre also was the theatre of the actor-playwright. Some of these playwright-actors have been mentioned earlier. Besides them, there is almost a regular procession of names like Bhaurao Kolhatkar, Ganpatrao Joshi, Ganpatrao Bhagavat, Keshavrao Bhonsle, Narayanarao Rajhans alias Bal Gandharva and others, whose role in bringing wide acceptance and respectability to the Marathi theatre is tremendous. Many of these actors became legends in their life time and are still remembered for their unique performances in female roles.

The Marathi theatre is different from the Bengali in yet another way. While the Bengali theatre was mostly residential and Calcutta-based, the Marathi theatre was intinerant. One reason for this variation is that though, like Calcutta, Bombay was a prominent industrial and commercial centre of the western region, it was dominated not by the Marathi-speaking people but by the Parsis and Gujaratis. Because of its itinerant character, the Marathi theatre had a much greater sweep and very soon it won the allegiance of the newly educated middle classes more than even the aristocrats. Perhaps, for this reason, it was more directly related to the movements for social reform and political independence. The top-ranking political leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak took keen interest in the theatre, while important activists like Kaka Saheb Khadilkar themselves became theatre workers. This relationship of the Marathi theatre with wider social questions has persisted. But even with such social commitment, by the fourth decade of this century, it lost its vitality and became inactive.

In another language of the western region, the Gujarati, the impact of the western theatre was greater and more pervasive from the very beginning, because of the enthusiasm and initiative of the very influential, prosperous and enterprising community of the region, the Parsis, who had readily accepted the western education and culture. The Parsis not only set up many industries and trades in collaboration with the English traders. they also formed professional theatre companies of the western type which staged their plays in Gujarati. The main area of their activity was Bombay, but the impact of their work was on the entire Gujarati-speaking region, because Bombay was the main centre of the newly emerging industrialists, traders and other western educated Gujaratis.

On account of a direct or indirect commercial bias, the Parsi as well as the general Gujarati theatre was, from the beginning, dominated by melodrama, spectacle and exaggeration. But even here many talented performers came to the fore, who with their skill succeeded in enchanting audiences. The plays written for this theatre were generally imitating the Shakespearean model and their stories were mostly drawn from the Muslim or Indian romantic tales and, later, also from the mythological and historical episodes. Much later, plays exposing social evils were also written. But in most of them, the dramatic structure was marked by melodrama or sensation generated by a clash of situations and characters, as in Shakespeare's plays, but they did not have the master's deep insight into or understanding of human mind and behaviour, or his poetic quality. These plays, therefore, though attracting the spectators when staged, were insignificant in a creative or artistic sense.

In South India, the English education certainly had an extensive sweep, but the performing arts there had a very strong and deeply entrenched tradition with almost a fanatic adherence, which considerably delayed the impact of the western style theatre. Later

in the 19th century, plays based on the new western model were written in the cities of the Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam language areas, and companies performing them were also established. In the theatres of all these languages, the actor-manager dominated, amongst whom P. Samband Mudaliar in Tamil, Tiger Vardhachar and Gubbi Veeranna in Kannada, and Dharmavaram Krishnamachari and T. Raghavachari in Telugu can be mentioned. The plays written or performed by these theatremen were all, more or less, like the plays of the Parsi theatre. Their stories were drawn from the mythological, historical or social events, but their form and structure were based on a superficial imitation of the plays of Shakespeare and other English writers, or Moliere. On the whole, their content had no insight or depth, and their form and technique no originality.

The situation in the Hindi-speaking areas of the North was totally different. This region, which was far away from the coastal industrial centres and foreign settlements, and which had been an old centre of political power, was dominated by very sharp and widespread anti-British sentiment and movement. Hence the British rulers were suspicious about this region and, therefore, reluctant or slow to introduce economic or educational reforms here. This in turn led to further impoverishment and slowed down the formation of a new educated middle class. A small sprinkling of the English-educated intelligentsia, basically feudal in outlook, was more preoccupied with politics, either for selfish, opportunist purposes or for nationalist objectives. They had little time or inclination for art and culture.

As a result, the new theatre could not take any shape there, nor could it acquire any independent existence. The needs for entertainment or theatrical experience of the cities and towns of this region had been met by the Parsi or other theatre companies of Bombay and Calcutta, since the sixth decade of the

last century. The main objective of these companies was to make money by providing cheap entertainment through melodramas presented in a spectacular manner. The repercussions of this situation on the theatre of the Hindi-speaking areas are noticeable even today.

Bhartendu Harishchandra, in the middle of the last century, did make a memorable effort to provide this region with its own distinct theatre, with a sort of synthesis of the new west-inspired and Indian traditional theatrical visions. Bhartendu was a poet, a playwright, an actor and manager of a theatre group all rolled into one. If his efforts had succeeded, the history of the theatre in the Hindi region would have been very different. Unfortunately, he died at a very yong age of 35 leaving the field open for the Parsi commercial theatrical companies which completely dominated the scene. A cheap, or titilating and, therefore, money-minting theatre overwhelmed the region to such an extent that later in the 20th century even the talent of a poet-playwright like Jaishankar Prasad could not make a dent into it.

It is true that even in the Parsi theatre there were outstanding and popular actors like Cowasji Khatau, Khurshedji Baliwala, Master Madan, Fida Hussain Narasi and others. Also, the playwrights like Agha Hashra, Narain Prasad Betab and Radhey Shyam Kathavachak deserve to be mentioned for the immense theatrical quality and, occasionally, the crafting of their plays, but artistic merit of their work is very little. The Parsi theatre could not acquire any significant or important position in the cultural life of the Hindi-speaking people.

The alien and rootless character of this otherwise effective and popular theatre is also evident from another subsequent development. As the silent movies

in the third, and the talkies in the fourth, decades of the 20th century made their debut, the Parsi theatre companies, including the owners, actors, playwrights and technicians, deserted the theatre for films, creating a situation of near total vacuum in the Hindi theatre. After that, apart from a few isolated amateur theatre groups in some cities, occasional elementary theatre activity was confined only to universities, colleges and schools. This situation continued till long after the Second World War.

Thus, not only in Hindi but in every language and region of the country, the theatre had come almost to a standstill around 1940. The companies closed down and the actors were jobless. It appeared that the theatre had no future in India. In the country-side, certainly, the traditional theatre was generally alive and active, but it had no contact with the new urban theatre.

During 1943-44, the rise of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) brought some life to the theatre in many regions of the country and gave it some strength and direction. This movement made a significant effort to bring drama and theatre closer to common people and make them socially relevant in terms of their content. But in its approach to form and techinque, and in the general outlook, the IPTA was basically West-oriented, and it had no clear perspective for relating itself to the rich theatre traditions of the country. It did, however, inspire a number of talented theatre workers in many regions and languages, who later became pioneers of very significant and creative theatre work. But IPTA, because of its inner contradictions, landed itself very soon in the morass of a narrow, sectarian attitude and was marginalised. Another similar attempt in Hindi—the Prithvi theatre started by the noted film

actor Prithviraj Kapoor, in 1944 in Bombay, with a nationalistic and socially-oriented selection of plays, but modelled more or less after the Parsi Theatre—also collapsed around 1960.

Actually, it was only about 1953-54 that the urban theatre evinced some life once again when the activity began, to some extent, at a new level. It has been said beore that the western theatrical model, which we had encountered under colonial conditions during the 19th century and which we had blindly accepted, was of the decadent Victorian theatre of England. The British companies which came out to India during those days only aimed at providing some diversion or entertainment to Englishmen living permanently or temporarily in India in connection with their work in commerce, industry, administration or army. They had no intention of presenting art or any form of western culture. Quite frequently, they were unimportant and inferior theatrical companies. Under these conditions, it was inevitable that by imitating their approach and style, the theatre which took shape in this country also aimed at only cheap entertainment, or at best some social reform according to the western concepts and practices.

In the fifth decade of the 20th century, a few years after Independence, the character and objectives of the Indian theatre and theatre workers began changing, which led to a many-sided change in their relations with the western theatre. Authentic and complete translations, or very carefully made adaptations, of the works of the most outstanding western playwrights began to be staged. Besides Shakespeare and Moliere, playwrights like Sophocles, Euripides, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorky, Sartre, Camus, Bertolt Brecht and many others were thus made available to theatres in Indian languages. Secondly,

many individuals now attracted towards the theatre considered it a means of creative expression and not primarily a source of profit. They drew inspiration not only from the best of the western drama but also the most significant artistic features and ideas of the western theatre. The theatre, for them, was not a mere pastime or a means of entertainment, but a way of life, a vehicle for exploring reality and the meaning of existence.

In this phase, at first, directors like Sombhu Mitra, Habib Tanvir, Ebrahim Alkazi, Shyamand Jalan, Utpal Dutt, Satyadev Dubey and later on Arvind Deshpande, Vijaya Mehta, Jabbar Patel, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Rajinder Nath, B.V. Karanth came to the fore. They completely changed the shape and level of the Indian theatre. In fact, productions like *Raktakarabi* (Rabindra Nath Tagore); *Chhenra Tar* (Tulsi Lahiri), *Dashachakra*, and *Putul Khela* (Ibsen) all by Sombhu Mitra; *Agra Bazar* by Habib Tanvir; *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (Mohan Rakesh), *Andha Yug* (Dharmavir Bharati) *King Lear* (Shakespeare), *King Oedipus* (Sophocles) all by Ebrahim Alkazi; *Shantata Court Chalu Ahe* (Vijay Tendulkar) by Arvind Deshpande, *Angar* by Utpal Dutt are theatrical creations of unprecedented artistic achievement in the Indian theatre.

To an extent, one of the results of this changed awareness and attitude towards the theatre was that, during the sixth and seventh decades, almost simultaneously in many languages, a number of creatively significant and original plays were written. *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Pagla Ghora* by Badal Sircar in Bengali; *Shantata Court Chalu Ahe*, *Ashi Pakhare Yeti* by Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi; *Kelu Janamejaya* by Adya Rangacharya, *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad in Kannada; *Andha Yug* by Dharmavir Bharati

and *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* and *Adhe Adhure* by Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, brought to Indian dramatic literature, once again after centuries, the status of creative work. In these plays, almost for the first time in Indian theatre after the period of the Sanskrit drama, there is an attempt to understand and articulate the basic philosophical and moral questions, dilemmas or contradictions of life today, the relationship between different layers of society, between individual and society, and between man and woman. These new plays tried to explore these areas of human concern in some depth and complexity never attempted before.

In dramatic form and technique, these plays generally show, at a sensitive and subtle level, the influence of modern and experimental western styles. In some plays, there are elements of the Indian traditional styles also. Altogether a kind of restlessness to forge a creative and aesthetic as also an original Indian dramatic style is evident in almost all the theatre workers of this phase, including the playwrights, directors, actors, stage technicians, critics and others.

An inevitable consequence of this process of making theatre a mode of creative expression was that these theatremen started questioning the nature and development of the modern theatre derived from the West, as well as its relevance and usefulness in the Indian context. Indeed, the dramatic style, which emerged in different Indian languages as a result of the country-wide efforts to write and stage plays in imitation of the western drama and stage, was gradually losing its novelty and fascination. The model had, during a period of more than a hundred years, produced very few plays which had any significant or distinct creative achievement. Disillusionment, sooner or later, was almost inevitable.

At the same time, it was only natural in this process that the desire to come out of this desert of imitation and to seek their own fertile region, should surface and become strong.

Since the beginning of the sixth decade itself, the young director Habib Tanvir had started attempts to forge a new indigenous idiom of theatre for which he went to the Sanskrit and the traditional theatre styles. Gradually, other theatre workers were also attracted towards this possibility and all aspects of theatrical activity were affected—dramatic writing, staging, acting, stagecraft, actor-audience relationship, theatre criticism etc. An effort to forge a new relationship with the ancient Sanskrit and medieval regional theatre was underway in the theatre of this country, and thus a new stage of the continuity of Indian theatre tradition gradually started taking shape. By the end of the seventies, this became a major trend of the contemporary Indian theatre, and throughout the country, in every region and language, many playwrights, directors, actors, technicians, theatre groups got involved in some manner or the other in this exploration.

There are many reasons for this new development. For instance, in almost every sphere of life in our country today, there is a widespread search for Indian identity and our arts are not an exception. Particularly, in the theatre world, the growing awareness of the imitative nature of the work in the past century and its consequences has produced a great dissatisfaction, generating an increasing pressure to go to the roots of our life, culture and arts. After Independence, for many reasons, our theatre people have had many more opportunities than before of an exposure to the traditional theatre of different languages and regions. As a result, they have, gradually,

become aware of and also impressed by its astonishing vitality, spontaneity, aesthetic freshness and popularity among the common people.

Meanwhile, theatre the world over was becoming more and more disillusioned with the naturalistic or realistic styles and methods. Many creative people in the West, in their search for a more imaginative, intimate and socially relevant theatre, were led to the theatres in Asia, including the traditional modes in India. During the last two decades, internationally known theatre directors, like Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, Peter Brook, have been exploring our traditional theatre performances and practices for their own artistic objectives and have repeatedly come to India in this connection. This also has led our theatre people to give a second look to our own traditional theatre once again. In addition, the phenomenal popularity of the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, in this country during the last two decades, specially the unprecedented success of the productions of his plays with some of the methods of our traditional performances, has also sharply underlined the theatricality, imaginativeness and inherent power of the latter.

But, in the last analysis, all these reasons are more or less incidental. Essentially, as soon as our theatre people began to come out of the colonial shackles of considering theatre merely a means of entertainment, the awareness of its cultural and creative significance gradually became strong. With this awareness increased the search for a theatrical vision, form and language which would be nearer the consciousness of our common people and consistent with our rich cultural heritage—entertaining and yet artistically meaningful. Besides, it was felt that our theatre should be distinct and strong enough to withstand

the glamour and spectacle of the film and the television, to retain its independent attraction. The realisation that our theatre tradition has such a potential has become increasingly stronger and deeper in the mind of our theatre people during the last few decades. In this context, it is important to note that the objective of this search for our own theatrical identity is not to go back to the past or to glorify any revivalism. Its aim is to assimilate and draw strength from our own theatre tradition for its creative utilization in communicating the experience of life today, in all its myriad forms, complexity and intensity.

It has been mentioned before that this exploration of the tradition is going on today in almost every aspect of our theatre activity and at every level. In dramatic writing, two trends are evident. One, a new play in the specific structure and style of a regional *natya* or mode; and second, an original play not in the form of any particular *natya*, but generally drawing upon the structures and theatrical methods of one or more regional modes. Some significant work has been done in both these trends, though the level of creative achievement of the plays so written is not uniform.

In the first category, for instance, Rasik Lal Parekh's *Mena Gurjari*, Chandravadan Mehta's *Hoholika* and Shanta Gandhi's *Jasma Odan* in Gujarati in the Bhavai mode; Vijay Tendulkar's *Sari Ga Sari* and Vasant Sabnis's *Gadhavachi Lagna* in Marathi in the Tamasha form; *Daku* by Mudrarakshas in Hindi in Nautanki style; or the recent *Siri Sampige* by Chandra Shekhar Kambar in Kannada on the pattern of the Yakshagana, can be mentioned. In these plays, the themes vary from the conventional stories of these *natyas* to the satirical treatment of a contemporary political situation. For instance, the Nautanki play,

Daku, by Mudrarakshas is a sharp and biting satire on the political corruption and self-aggrandizement in connection with the surrender of the Chambal outlaws before a Chief Minister. All these plays, except, probably, Chandravadan Mehta's *Hoholika*, are full-length plays in which, while retaining the structural characterstics of the particular *natya*, a more carefully planned arrangement of the situations, characterization and sophisticated language has been introduced. Though the creative achievement of these plays is not very much above the ordinary, they still bring a new flavour to the dramatic writing for the modern theatre, and some of their productions have been popular among the city as well as the village audiences.

But these plays do not attract the traditional troupes and their performers, while the urban groups do not have the requisite skill and experience to stage them effectively. Thus they never go beyond a mere experiment, creating some variety only in the urban theatre.

The only instance of writing and staging new plays entirely in a traditional mode is that of the Jatra in Bengali. Because of the specific political, cultural and theatrical circumstances of Bengal, the Jatra, since the end of the last century, became a vehicle of political themes, sentiments and ideas, though for long its formal character remained more or less traditional. But in the present phase, specially during the last few decades, it has become a melodramatic, sentimental and money-making theatrical style, in which the traditional elements of the Jatra are either not there or are very grossly distorted. Today, it has plays on, besides the mythological stories, the latest national and international, social and political events and personages. The professional or commercial Jatra companies travel to different towns and villages

of Bengal, showing the Jatra plays on the life of Lenin, Stalin, Karl Marx, Ho Chi Minh as well as on romantic and the so-called social themes, in the manner of the commercial films. Their financial success is phenomenal and outstrips that of any other theatrical activity. Evidently, this is not any creative use or an enrichment of the tradition, but a kind of disintegration due to an unfortunate commercialization. This development, in one of the most important *natyas* of the country, indicates that the problems related to the traditional theatre and its performers in different regions and languages are very complex and many-layered. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

The other trend, in which there is a creative interaction between the original dramatic writing and the traditional theatre, is really the more important one. Based on innovative use of the structural elements and methods of one or more *natyas*, a number of new plays have been written with exciting results. To mention some of them, in Kannada, *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad and *Jokumar Swami* by Chandra Shekhar Kambar; in Marathi, *Ghashiram Kotwal* by Vijay Tendulkar, *Mahanirvan* by Satish Alekar; in Malayalam, *Karimkutty* and *Pashu Gayatri* by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, *Kirat* and *Karut Daiwate Tedi* by G. Shankar Pillai; in Bengali, *Raj Darshan* by Manoj Mitra, *Nathavati Anathavat* by Saoli Ghosh, *Kinu Kaharer Thetar* by Mohit Chattopadhyay, *Madhav Malanchi Koinya* by Bibhash Chakravarti; in Chhattisgarhi, a regional dilect of Hindi, *Charandas Chor* and *Bahadur Kalarin* by Habib Tanvir; in Hindi, *Bakri* by Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, *Rasgandharva* by Mani Madhukar; in Manipuri, *Uchek Lengmei Dong* by Ratan Kumar Thiyam, *Leigi Macha Signa* by H. Kanhailal, *Khuman Chakha Mairang Ngamba* by Lokendra Arambam; in

Gujarati, *Leela* by Bakul Tripathi, and so on. This is not an exhaustive list, and many other plays in this new idiom have come up. But even this enumeration of plays and playwrights underlines the sweep, importance and significance of the new trend. This contains not only some of the best plays, but also a large number of outstanding playwrights, the established and the up-coming, of the modern phase.

In these plays, many elements of the traditional performance scripts have been incorporated at many levels of imagination and artistic quality, frequently in a very effective manner. For instance, most of these plays have a flexible structure in which various threads of the story or the dramatic action are linked together by a narrator called *sutradhara, bhagavata* or *vachaka*. There is also an interesting variety in the use of this device. In Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the *bhagavata* carries out a number of functions—of the singer-narrator, linking various episodes, commenting on the action, enactment of small roles. In *Mahanirvana* by Satish Alekar, the central character of the play himself is the *sutradhara* and he carries out both these roles with great ease. In Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*, the *sutradhara* is an extremely witty, humorous and attractive character, who while linking the dramatic action from beginning to end, underlines the meaning of the play. In the single performer play by Saoli Ghosh, *Nathavati Anathavat*, Draupadi is not only its central character but also its narrator, commentator, and coordinator. In *Rasgandharva* by Mani Madhukar, many characters act as *sutradhara* or commentator on different occasions.

It is interesting to note that such a concept of the *sutradhara* has been provided to these playwrights by one or more *natyas* of their own region or other

regions of the country, which they have also changed according to their needs. These changes have been made for almost the similar reasons which prompted the theatremen in the medieval ages to change the *sutradhara* of the Sanskrit drama into the various *sutradharas* of the regional *natyas*.

Another important feature of the traditional theatre is the use of myth, legend or folk tale as a metaphor for contemporary situations, as a result of which it has been posible to bring as characters in the plays, animals, birds, trees and other elements from the natural and the supernatural, the everyday and the imaginary, the human and the non-human reality. In many plays, instead of using the normal sequences or the unities of time and place, attempts have been made to present simultaneously different periods and locales according to the dramatic requirements. Most of these plays have also an effective and interesting use of poetry, song and rhythmic or rhymed speech,

All these elements reveal altogether a new horizon of the contemporary Indian dramatic writing. It is no more necessary to consider that an exposition of the cause-effect relationship between the internal and external conflict of an individual and the explosive climax produced by its increasing intensity is an inevitable or the only method of building up dramatic action. By a sensitive and careful use of the traditional methods, many other ways of constructing a powerful play will become possible and many new areas and levels of the individual and social reality and experience will find expression in plays.

But, more than the dramatic writing, it is in the staging or production methods of the contemporary theatre that the interaction with the traditional modes has brought about a fundamental, and an almost revolutionary change. The traditional *natyas* have

opened up a limitless horizon for movement and speech in acting, called the *angika* and *vachika abhinaya* in the *natyashastra*. Not only for the training of the actor, but also for many kinds of theatrical expressions, a number of new and rich sources of movements, postures and attitudes are present in the traditional theatre—dance, ritual, martial arts, acrobatics, etc. Similarly, many methods for miming objects, properties, situations and places, or gestures of body and hand for some special situations are also available.

In the *vachika* or the speech, several methods of cultivating and strengthening the voice, various modes of speaking—from a simple use of speech to stylization, including straight dialogue, poetic recitation, chanting and innumerable forms of dramatic singing—are available. Imaginative conventions to indicate the change of time and place, use of the half curtain for emphasizing a character or a situation, devices to organise dramatic action simultaneously at many levels, masks and many other tools from the traditional modes have now become easily acessible to the director and the performer. In scenic design, instead of creating a naturalistic or realistic setting of verisimilitude, the use of symbolism, suggestivity, miming, half curtain, levels etc., has found tremendous encouragement from the new idiom inspired by the traditional theatre.

Thus a novel and flexible indigenous theatrical form with exciting new possibilities seems to be gradually emerging. The production styles which are taking shape in this process are, in some manner or the other, the styles of a total theatre, in which poetry, dance, music, mime and even some forms of the visual arts are blended together. These styles are simple, inexpensive, actor-oriented and mainly

presentational or theatrical. Together with depth and intensity of human experience, the elements of attractive entertainment for the spectators are present here in full measure. In many ways, this is the beginning of a revival and restoration of a real theatrical art, in which the dramatic experience is communicated not by any external imitation of reality, but by exciting the imagination of the spectators and enabling them to participate in the theatrical act.

This conclusion is borne out by many productions of the last two decades. It would not be an exaggeration to say that most of the creatively outstanding productions of these years are those which have been inspired or influenced in some manner by the various usages and elements of the traditional theatre. Among these are many of the productions of all those plays mentioned in connection with the dramatic writing in the new idiom. Besides them, a number of modern Indian, Sanskrit and western plays also have had very exciting, artistic and effective presentations during the preceding years. In Hindi, Shakespeare's *Macheth* as *Barnam Vana* by B.V. Karanth, Gogol's *Inspector General* as *Ala Afsar* and Ben Jonson's *Volpone* as *Lomadkhan Ka Vesh*, both directed by Bansi Kaul; in Tamil, Sophocles' *Antigone* by Ramaswamy; or in Chhattisgarhi, Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentlemen* as *Lala Hakeekat Rai* by Habib Tanvir may be controversial productions, but with their artistic boldness and theatrical imagination they have succeeded in capturing the attention of the spectators.

From this point of view, the productions of many plays of Bertolt Brecht staged in a variety of attractive styles, have been particuarly successful and popular. For example, the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Marathi by Vijaya Mehta, in Bundelkhandi by Fritz Benewitz, in Punjabi by M.K. Raina and Kavita Nagpal; the

Three Penny Opera in Marathi by Jabbar Patel, and *Puntilla* in Hindi by Fritz Benewitz, are productions in which the methods and devices of the traditional theatre have been freely and creatively used and have become extremely significant works of the contemporary Indian theatre.

But more amazing and exciting than even these have been the productions of the Sanskrit plays, in original Sanskrit or in many regional languages. In these performances, different directors have used the devices and methods of the *natyas* and rituals of their respective regions and have given a new sense of power and potential to the Indian theatre activity. *Mrichchhakatika* by Habib Tanvir and Ebrahim Alkazi in Hindi; *Madhyama Vyayoga*, *Karnabhara*, *Abhijnan Shakuntala* and the fourth Act of *Vikramorvashiya* in Sanskrit and *Urubhanga* and *Mattavilasa* in Hindi, all by K.N. Panikkar; *Urubhanga* and the fourth Act of *Vikramorvashiya* in Manipuri by Ratan Kumar Thiyam; *Malavikagnimitra* in Malavi by B.V. Karanth and *Mattavilasa* in Hindi by Kumar Verma have, in a manner, changed the temper of the contemporary theatre activity in our country. Of course, they are not all of the same standard. While some of them represent almost the highest achievements of the contemporary theatre in our country, the others reveal just a new level of the power of expression and communication of the traditional theatre which has made a deep impact on the contemporary activity.

Here it would be useful to mention another form of the continuity of the Indian theatre tradition. After centuries, the Sanskrit plays are again becoming an intrinsic and important part of our theatre life. It is so not in the manner of a ritualistic homage to the plays written in the 'Devabhasha' (the language of the gods), or as a kind of revivalistic act. Rather, it is an

effort to understand the special production styles of the Sanskrit plays and to make them understandable for the modern spectators. In other words, it is an attempt to explore and discover in a creative manner the relevance of the Sanskrit theatre for our life today. There is no doubt that in this process the Indian theatre tradition, broken or forgotten for some time, is acquiring a new continuity.

The theatre idiom, emerging as a result of this growing interaction with the classical Sanskrit theatre and the medieval *natya*, is transcending the regional and/or linguistic limits and obstructions, without losing its local flavour or its roots. Probably, after centuries once again, a new pan Indian theatrical vision, approach, and even a style, are emerging which, with all their various local flavours, would be recognised by the spectators all over the country and would also please them.

Some of the consequences of this new development deserve to be mentioned. One, many directors are now using performers or singer-actors/actresses of the traditional theatre from the country-side in their productions. Till a few years back, only Habib Tanvir had in his company some performer-singers from Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. Gradually, they became the more prominent members of his troupe and the number of urban performers dwindled. This forced Habib Tanvir to stage his plays only in the Chhattisgarhi dialect, or in a kind of mixed language, as his rural performers could not speak Hindi with enough confidene and involvement. The main centres of troupe's performances were cities and towns of the Hindi-speaking and other regions and not the Chhattisgarh area, making them almost everywhere the performances in an unfamiliar or partially understood language. This situation provided to some

talented rural performers not only an opportunity of work but also brought them recognition in the urban, in fact, the national cultural life. But it was not very clear whether the experiment was opening up any significant new opportunities for the theatre workers and the theatre in general in the Chhattisgarh region itself, or was it only another form of a person from the country-side finding a job of his choice in the city. All the same, during recent years, as the interest of the urban theatre persons in the traditional theatre has become wider and deeper, the rural performers have been increasingly involved in the work of the urban theatre groups. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar has in his troupe, Sopanam, a number of traditional performers, singers and musicians of Kerala. In Madhya Pradesh Rangamandal, B.V. Karanth employed a few traditional singer-actors, who are performing with the urban members of the company both in the dialects as well as in Hindi. Often their performances are more skilful and competent than those of their urban counterparts. A new source, rich and inexhaustible, of talented professional performers has opened up for the contemporary Indian theatre.

During the eighties, the Sangeet Natak Akademi launched an imaginative scheme under which a number of performances were staged with one or more traditional players; for instance, in Bhanu Bharati's production of *Pashu Gayatri* in Rajasthani language, based on a Rajasthani *Natya*, Gavari; Ravi Shankar Kemu's production in Kashmiri, *Ashiq Te Gopali*; or in Ramaswamy's Tamil adaptation of *Antigone* by Sophocles, and so on. For the performers of the Swang or the Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, the Bhavai in Gujarat, the Tamasha in Maharashtra, similar contact with the urban theatre has come about.

This is a new trend which can have far reaching consequences and can lead to a new interaction between the traditional rural and the modern urban theatres. This has great possibilities of creative enrichment and productiveness of the theatre activity in both the rural and the urban sectors of the country. The traditional performers thus involved in the urban theatre can, with fresh outlook and imagination, give a new direction and dynamism to the theatre in the country-side. At the same time, the possibility cannot also be altogether ruled out that these traditional performers get enamoured of the glamour of the city life and, eventually, their contact or relationship with the rural theatre and their own roots are completely snapped. Anyway, a form of a confluence of the two theatre streams is certainly present in this situation, which can reduce, if not altogether eliminate, the centuries old gap between the urban and the rural theatres, deepened further by the western impact.

Due to the isolation from our tradition for a long time under colonial conditions, this entire process tends to be very self-conscious, deliberate, lacking in spontaneity. As a result, many such forms and levels of the work are visible which have their own special problems, difficulties and challenges. The important thing is that this process is liberating the traditional theatre from the confines of the country-side or the rural communities and linking it with the wider national mainstream of the theatre. The process which had started about a thousand years ago, of theatre activity shifting from the capitals or cities to the rural areas, and gradually acquiring only a rural character, or the one which emerged about 150 years ago under the influence of or the contact with the western theatre, of the theatre being totally confined

to the cities—both these processes are under change and the possibility of the unification of the urban and rural theatre traditions is clearly discernible, howsoever slow it may be.

This possibility has also underlined one more point very sharply. It is now urgently necessary to search for and define or develop some new methods and principles for the training of an Indian theatre practitioner. These principles and methods should be such that a performer is not only skilled in psychological acting of the western kind, or in depicting the inner life of a character and the forms of subtle conflicts; he should also be able to learn Indian methods of miming, together with music, dance and ways of using these in his performances. Such training programme will have to introduce the voice and movement exercises of the Indian tradition for speech and body training. It is becoming increasingly clear that the serious theatre people desiring to do significant work will have to prepare themselves for a long, hard and multi-level training and practice, as has been so far indispensable for those who desire to learn the art of music and dance in our country.

This new phase of Indian theatre cannot be one of merely reviving the traditional theatre forms or styles. The Sanskrit theatre, too, did not survive in its original form in its subsequent development in the regions and their languages, but maintained its continuity by changing according to the new social, artistic and theatrical conditions and their requirements. Now also the various elements of the aesthetics of the traditional *natyas*—their methods, conventions and devices—would be incorporated in the modern theatre according to the requirements of the social, cultural life today. In any age, only such a form of assimilation of the tradition can be and is

creative—not its blind revival but its imaginative exploration and recreation. Such a process of re-creation is on the anvil today.

The most important contribution of the western theatre was that, after a gap of almost a thousand years, drama—not merely the performance script—became an indispensable and important element of our theatrical work. In the western theatre, the mode of a dramatic presentation only on the basis of a performance script had gradually disappeared since the time of the Commedia dellarte, and until very recently it was impossible to imagine a theatrical creation without a pre-written play. As a result of the influence of the western theatre, and on account of making it our mode, a large number of plays have been written since the 19th century, in each of our regional languages, for staging, and if, for some reasons, that was not possible, then at least for reading. Thus, during the last 150 years, a large body of dramatic literature has come up in all the Indian languages. Though, partly on account of a long gap in the tradition of written drama in our country, and partly because of the imitative nature of the new theatre, most of the plays so written, have failed to acquire any significant creative level. Still, all this writing has re-established the importance of drama in a theatrical creation. It has also given an experience and practice of writing plays, some results of which can be seen in a few of the important plays written during the last two or three decades.

On account of the western influence, too, a kind of immediacy and topicality came to not only the form but also the content of our dramatic writing. It is no more merely a narrative of the mythological episodes, lives and deeds of great people, with only indirect, incidental or occasional references to contemporary

everyday life. It has now become a vehicle of presenting directly the aspirations and struggles for a better life of the common people. It is not merely a reconstruction of the achievements of the past, but also a mirror of the acute, immediate conflicts of today's life. The contact with the western drama and theatre has given to our theatrical activity a new sense of social responsibility and contemporary life.

Another result of the contact with the western theatre was that it broke down the internal and external isolation of the Indian theatre. Today, it has an interaction with the world theatre. So far this interaction had been largely one-sided, with a sense of inferiority, and not inspired and determined mainly by our own internal requirements. But there has been a change in this situation during the last one or two decades. Now, many eminent western theatre people are anxious to know or are actually engaged in knowing and understanding the Indian theatre tradition. A number of contemporary Indian plays have been translated and productions presented in the western countries and have been widely appreciated. Similarly, the contact and interaction between the contemporary theatres of different regions within the country has also increased and become many sided. In the process, a concept of 'Indian Theatre' is, gradually, emerging. This new concept is different from the one which prevailed in the ancient times of a theatre in one single Indian language, i.e., Sanskrit. Today, it is based on a mutual exchange of the plays, presentation styles, methods, and even the performers, between different regional languages.

The urge in the Indian theatre to find its own identity, which has become increasingly pronounced and strong, during the last two or three decades, has led to the beginning of a new relationship of the

modern theatre, not only with our own ancient classical and the medieval theatres, but also with the western and the Asian theatres. This is an effort to realise the continuity of the Indian theatre tradition in new conditions and in a new manner, which, in spite of the changes and diversities of forms and levels, has always been visibly or invisibly present. This continuity is an evidence of the great vitality of the Indian theatre and its deeper relationship with the life and culture of the people, as also of its power, its capacity for renewal, and its creativity.

The phase of Indian theatre, which developed under the influence of the western theatrical vision and practices, is now in its last stage. At the moment, it appears that the preparation for a new stage is on in many ways, in many forms and at many levels. The main factor in this situation is the increasing contact, and familiarity with and assimilation of the theatrical methods of the ancient Sanskrit and medieval theatres in our contemporary activities. Another facet of the same situation is a deep and often painful re-evaluation of the relevance of the western theatre styles and methods in our own work.

It would be very naive to dream or desire that we can continue our theatrical activity by completely denying either of them and on the basis of only one of them. This is neither possible nor desirable. Almost every aspect of the life in our country has been influenced, more or less, by the western culture, social system, and the political-economic ideas and institutions. Though some of the elements in this influence have been destructive and unnecessary, there is quite a lot in it which has released our society and individual from many of the old, decadent shackles, and has given us new tools and weapons to understand and control our life in the contemporary

world. It is true that we got this at a very great cost, and if we had not come in contact with the western world and its culture, in the manner in which we did, as a culture of the conquerors, we would have acquired all these qualities according to our own needs by our own struggles. All the same, some of these elements have become an indispensable part of the individual and collective life of our people and their mental make-up.

The theatre is not very different, too, in this respect. The western theatre has given us a new insight and also many new tools. What is necessary today is to link these acquisitions with our traditional tools, and by combining both shape a new phase of our theatre. This theatre should be related deeply with the dynamic and lasting values of our own culture and ethos, and should at the same time help us in finding and establishing our identity and a place in the contemporary world. Such a form of the continuity of the Indian theatre tradition would be very valuable and productive.